

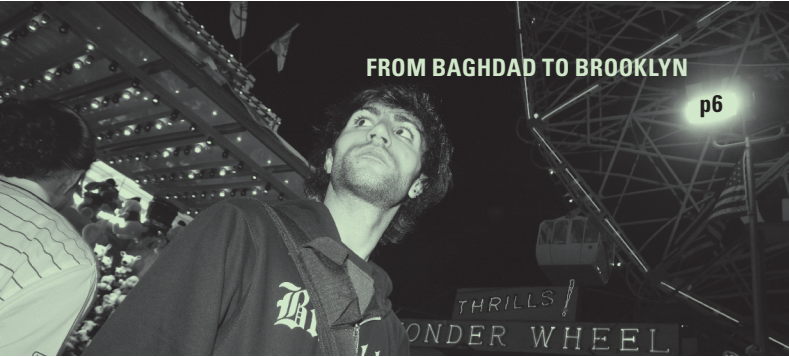
SPECIAL REPORT: INSIDE OBAMA'S RECOVERY PLAN, PAGE 8

THE INDYPENDENT

Issue #129, DECEMBER 11, 2008 – JANUARY 15, 2009
A FREE PAPER FOR FREE PEOPLE



ILLUSTRATION BY LOUJOE



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The Independent is a New York-based free newspaper published 17 times a year on Fridays. Since 2000, more than 600 citizen journalists, artists and media activists have contributed their time and energy to this project. Winner of dozens of New York Community Media Alliance awards, *The Independent* is dedicated to empowering people to create a true alternative to the corporate press by encouraging citizens to produce their own media. *The Independent* is funded by subscriptions, donations, grants, merchandise sales, benefits and advertising from organizations with similar missions. Volunteers write and edit articles, take photographs, do design work and illustrations, help distribute papers, update the website and more! *The Independent* reserves the right to edit articles for length, content and clarity.

The Independent is the newspaper project of the New York City Independent Media Center, which is affiliated with the global Indymedia movement (indymedia.org), an international network that is dedicated to fostering grassroots media production. NYC IMC sponsors three other projects, the children's newspaper *IndyKids*, the IndyVideo news team and the NYC IMC open publishing website (nyc.indymedia.org). NYC IMC relies on volunteer participation and is open to anyone who is interested.

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community calendar

Please send event announcements to
indyevents@gmail.com.

MON DEC 15

7:30–9pm • \$5 Donation
DISCUSSION: IS CAPITALISM COMING APART? POST-ELECTION TUMULT AND OPPORTUNITIES. Join the Freedom Socialist Party in discussing the presidential election results in the context of the history of vote suppression. Freedom Hall, 113 W 128th St (btwn Malcolm X/Lenox & 7th Aves) 212-222-0633 • socialism.com

TUE DEC 16

7pm • FREE
READING: *GIVE ME LIBERTY*. Naomi Wolf reads from her book, *Give Me Liberty: A Handbook for American Revolutionaries*. Bluestockings, 172 Allen St (btwn Stanton & Rivington Sts) 212-777-6028 • bluestockings.com

SAT DEC 20

Noon • FREE
READING: *RADICAL STORIES FOR KIDS*. Editors Julia Mickenberg and Philip Nel will read from *Tales for Little Rebels*, a collection of 40 mostly out-of-print stories and comic strips for children that embody the hopes and concerns of social justice movements. Bluestockings, 172 Allen St (between Stanton & Rivington Sts) 212-777-6028 • bluestockings.com

SUN DEC 21

3pm • \$12
PERFORMANCE: REVEREND BILLY & THE CHURCH OF STOP SHOPPING. How will you survive the holiday onslaught of Starbucks gingerbread lattes and last-minute Big Box bargain stampedes? Dixon Place, 161 Chrystie St 866-811-4111 • revbilly.com

SAT DEC 27

9pm • Sliding scale (Min \$10)
BENEFIT: CONCERT FOR WAR RESISTERS LEAGUE. Join War Resisters League for a night of music with acclaimed songwriter and activist Judy Gorman. Banjo Jim's, 700 E 9th St (@ Ave C) 212-228-0450 • liz@warresisters.org, warresisters.org

TUE DEC 30

7 pm • \$5 Sugged Donation
PERFORMANCE: WOMEN'S/TRANS' POETRY JAM AND OPEN MIC. With Amina Munoz-Ali & Sandra Catena. Hosted by Vittoria Repetto. Deliver (up to) 8 minutes of your poetry, prose, songs and spoken word. Bluestockings, 172 Allen St (btwn Stanton & Rivington Sts) 212-777-6028 • bluestockings.com

WED DEC 31

10:30pm • FREE
EVENT: 11th ANNUAL NEW YEAR'S EVE BICYCLE RIDE AND OUTDOOR AFTERPARTY. Start the new year off right with Time's Up! in Washington Square Park. This ride will have meet-ups in Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens with an afterparty with a marching band and fireworks at Belvedere Castle in Central Park at 79th St. Dress festively and bring food to share. Washington Square Park, Manhattan For more info: times-up.org

SUN JAN 4

10:45am-7pm • FREE
EVENT: 4th ANNUAL MEMORIAL RIDE AND WALK. Join Ghost Bikes in remembering bicyclists who have been killed or hit on the street. There will be four separate ride/walk locations: North Bronx, Astoria, Sunset Park and Chinatown. ghostbikes.org

10am-4pm • FREE
RECYCLE: COMPUTERS AND ELECTRONICS. Drop off your old television sets, printers, laptops, radios, cell phones, disks, wires and computers. Union Square Park, North Plaza (17th St @ Broadway) 212-477-4022 • lesecologycenter.org

TUE JAN 6

3pm-5pm • FREE
EVENT: MILITARY VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: A MAJOR THREAT TO PEACE. Join Col. Ann Wright, an international peace activist and retired military officer, as she addresses sexual violence against women in the U.S. military and against civilian populations residing near U.S. military bases. The Interchurch Center, 475 Riverside Drive (@ W 120th St) Info: jenkins@exchange.tc.columbia.edu

DEC—JAN



Christmas at the Palin household

FRANK REYNOSO

TUE JAN 6

7 pm • FREE
DISCUSSION: THE REPUBLICAN PARTY'S EFFECT ON AMERICAN SEXUALITY with authors Win McCormack (author of *You Don't Know Me: A Citizen's Guide to Republican Family Values*) and Dagmar Herzog (author of *Sex in Crisis: The New Sexual Revolution & the Future of American Politics*). McNally Jackson, 52 Prince St (btwn Lafayette & Mulberry Sts) 212-274-1160 • mcnallyjackson.com

WED JAN 14

7 pm • FREE
READING: *SHOOT AN IRAQI: ART, LIFE, AND RESISTANCE UNDER THE GUN* with author Wafaa Bilal, native Iraqi artist, creator of the controversial art project,

“Domestic Tension.” For a month in 2007, he lived in the line of fire of a remote-controlled paintball gun and a camera that connected him to Internet viewers around the world, who could shoot at him 24 hours a day. McNally Jackson, 52 Prince St (btw Lafayette & Mulberry Sts) 212-274-1160 • mcnallyjackson.com

FRI JAN 16

7 pm • \$7 donation
FILM: *THE ASSASSINATION OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR* chronicles the last days of the civil rights leader, who was being closely watched by the FBI during his years as a leading civil rights activist. ANSWER office, 2295 Adam Clayton Powell Blvd (@ 135th St) 212-694-8720 • answercoalition.org

reader comments

DEMS NOT ABOUT CHANGE

Response to “Change We Can Really Believe in,” Nov. 17:

What fundamentally prevents President-elect Obama from fulfilling expectations of “change” at home and abroad is that the Democratic Party is not in essence a left-wing party that believes in radical change. Democrats do not fundamentally oppose the death penalty or the Second Amendment. This is far removed from left-wing philosophy around the globe, whether it be in Europe or in Latin America.

—ELIANITA55

Response to “Future Perfect,” Nov. 17:

Even though I didn't vote for Obama, I am truly glad that he

gives hope to millions of my fellow Americans. ... Our nation has finally elected a President who is a man of color. By his election, to me it seems that we, as a nation, have finally reached a point to where the playing field is level ... the bickering, whining, the oppression boo-hooing, “the man is keeping us down” talk needs to cease. Whether you voted for him or not, we need to embrace him, stand behind him, and roll up our sleeves and get to work on getting our nation back on course as the greatest nation on Earth.

—K.T.

SIDESHOW

Response to “Scandalicious,” Nov. 17:

There's a deeper issue here. If

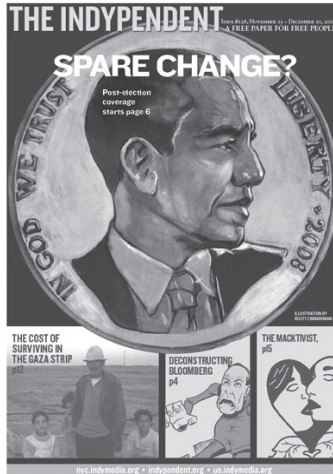
they [the mainstream media] talked about what McCain and Obama actually believed in, policy-wise, it would soon be clear that they are damn near identical! Thus the focus on scandals is to better obscure just how similar the two parties of Corporate America really are. —GREGORY A. BUTLER

SOMEONE'S GOT TO BE THE BAD GUY

Response to “Election Day will Not Be Enough: An Interview with Howard Zimm,” Nov. 17:

Isn't the Military Industrial Complex, the wars we wage, the bases we hold, the wars started by other countries that we perpetuate with weapons sales the only thing that ensures our posi-

tion as world power? If we divest from that practice wouldn't some other imperialist government take over where we left off and perhaps insure their position by destroying the United States? —KENNY



Blacklist Blues

LANDLORDS USE DODGY DATABASE TO FEND OFF FEISTY TENANTS

By Susan Lippman

About ten years ago, a lawyer suggested that I withhold my rent because my landlord had consistently failed to provide adequate heat, and my building was infested with mice and roaches. Because the landlord had had a string of serious violations, the lawyer was convinced that I would get a rent abatement in New York City Housing Court. When the landlord took me to court for not paying rent, his attorney offered no defense to my complaints about conditions in the building. I won an abatement and did not have to pay any rent for six months.

Little did I know at the time that allowing the landlord to take me to Housing Court would make it almost impossible for me to rent another apartment, not only here in New York City, but anywhere in the United States. Had I known that, would I have still withheld rent? Probably not. I definitely would not do it again.

A few years later, I tried to move, as the conditions in my building had gotten worse. When I mentioned the court case, a real-estate agent told me, “Don’t even bother to look for an apartment. No landlord in this city will rent to you.” I didn’t volunteer the information at another real-estate agency, but the agent there asked if I’d ever been to Housing Court. Once again I was told that it would be impossible for me to find another apartment.

I had been a tenant activist for years and had never before heard about the tenant blacklist. Neither had Adam White, who withheld rent to protest a leaky roof. Although he prevailed in court and got a rent abatement, he was denied an apartment based on the report from a tenant-screening agency, which indicated only that the landlord had initiated a case against him.

In 2007, tenant attorney James Fishman settled a class-action lawsuit by 35,000 tenants against First American Registry, the largest “tenant screening bureau” that buys data on Housing Court cases from New York State and sells it to landlords. The company, which has changed its name to First Advantage, agreed to pay \$1.9 million in damages. It now must indicate the outcome of the case on all its reports, expunge cases found to be without merit or brought in error, and expunge all cases after seven years.

The suit did not eliminate the problem. Federal District Judge Lewis A. Kaplan, who approved the settlement, said that “it

leaves defendants’ business model essentially intact” and “the potential for abuse quite plainly remains.” The New York State Office of Court Administration (OCA) continues to sell electronic data on Housing Court cases going back about 15 years. While court records are public, selling them en masse makes it much easier to use them to develop a blacklist, explains Fishman.

“The law only says the court has to make court records available at the clerk’s office one file at a time. What the court is doing here is selling in an electronic form a mass quantity of information all at once,” says Fishman. “The court system should not be selling this data. You would put these tenant-screening companies out of business if the source of information dried up.”

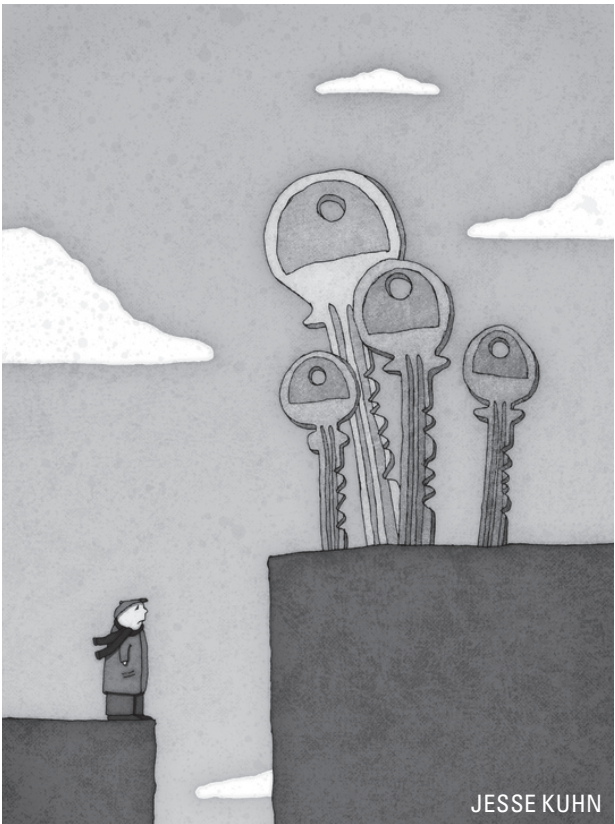
The system is rife with serious problems. Electronic data can often be sketchy or inaccurate. Tenants who wish to have their cases expunged must submit a court order of judgment and a written request, often including court documents and letters from landlords. And finding out whose list you’re on can be a daunting task. Fishman filed a Freedom of Information Act request and got a list of eight companies that buy Housing Court records.

Tenant-screening bureaus sometimes include cases in which the tenant initiated the court proceeding, usually in order to get repairs, Fishman adds. Though tenants who file HP (housing part) actions are not supposed to be black-listed, he explains, there’s no guarantee that they won’t be.

He acknowledges that the lawsuit, although definitely a step in the right direction, has by no means resolved the situation. “What we did intend and accomplish is to raise people’s consciousness of the problem,” he says. “Rights are worthless if you cannot enforce them.”

Until the OCA is permanently enjoined from selling electronic data to screening companies, Fishman says that all tenant-screening companies should be licensed. That way, everyone would know with whom they are dealing. This would have to be done by state law.

In 2007 and 2008, State Senator Liz Krueger and Assemblymember Daniel O’Donnell sponsored a bill that would have made it unlawful for landlords to consider a tenant’s history in court cases that arise from landlord-tenant disputes, unless that tenant was evicted against his or her will. “This would ensure that appearance in court in and of itself would not prevent a tenant from obtaining new housing,” the bill said. Supporters of



the bill noted that of the 375,000 Housing Court cases each year in New York State, only 25,000 result in warrants of eviction.

The bill never got out of committee in either house of the Legislature.

Despite the legislators good intentions, the bill did not appear to have a strong enforcement mechanism. Proving that they were denied an apartment solely because they had appeared in Housing Court would probably be quite difficult for tenants.

Until the OCA stops selling data, tenants could be protected by requiring screening agencies to expunge all cases in which the tenants prevail and are given rent abatements. Another important consideration, says Louise Seeley of the City Wide Task Force on Housing Court, is protecting tenants who were residing in foreclosed houses and have been evicted through no fault of their own.

ONLINE: After a string of legal setbacks, tenants at 47 E. Third Street in the Lower East Side have decided to concede and take a buyout from the building’s owners who used the pretext of “owner-occupany” to give their rent-stabilized tenants the boot. To find out more about this precedent-setting case, see Steven Wishnia’s report on indypendent.org.

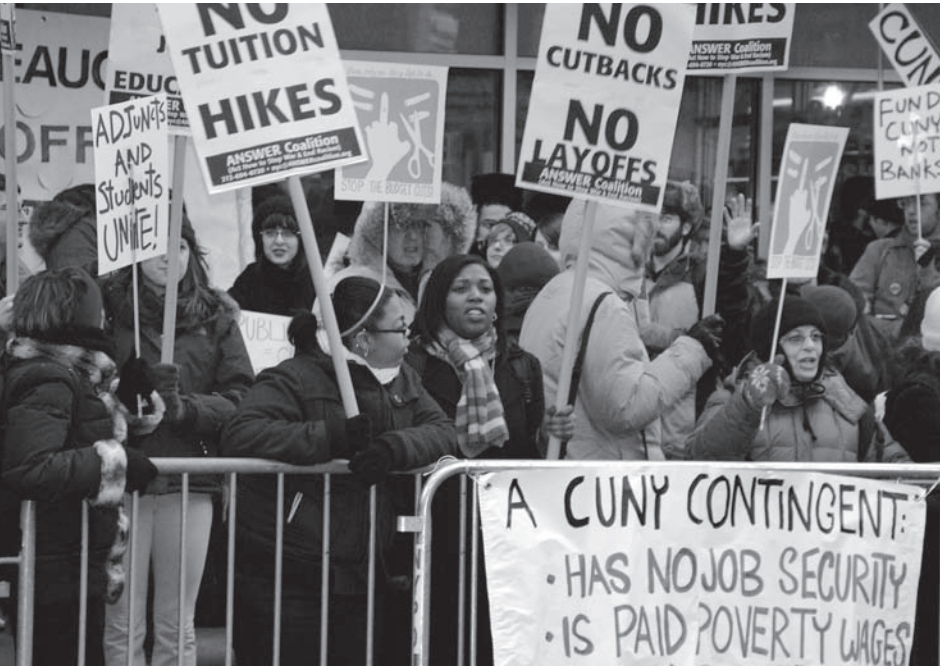
THE INDY SWEEPS THE IPPIES

The Independent won awards for excellence in reporting, photography and design at the Dec. 7 “Ippies” Awards banquet sponsored by the New York Community Media Alliance (NYCMA). NYCMA is an association of nearly 100 community and ethnic newspapers that publish in New York City. With a total of five Ippies, *The Independent* garnered more awards than any other newspaper in the city for the fifth time in six years.



The Feb. 1, 2008 issue of The Independent won first place for Best Overall Design.

- 1ST PLACE: Best Overall Design**
Ryan Dunsmuir & Anna Gold
- 2ND PLACE: Best Article on Immigrant Issues, Racial or Social Justice**
Joseph Huff-Hannon & Chris Anderson, “Facing Foreclosure: Brooklyn Retiree on Verge of Losing Home as Subprime Lenders Target Cash-Poor Black Seniors.”
- 2ND PLACE: Best Photograph**
Alex Nathanson, “The War Hits Home.”
- 3RD PLACE: Best Investigative Story**
Jessica Lee, “Bringing the War on Terrorism Home: Congress Considers How to ‘Disrupt’ Radical Movements in the United States.”
- 3RD PLACE: Best Photo Essay**
Karl Hoffman, “Living on the Border.”



A LESSON IN CLASS: Chanting “Foreclose Wall Street, bail out the students!” about 100 City University of New York (CUNY) students and faculty and City Councilperson Charles Barron rallied in the cold outside Baruch College Dec. 8. They gathered as the Board of Trustees met inside to approve tuition increases of as much as 15 percent that would take affect beginning in the fall of 2009. Under the plan, tuition could increase at CUNY’s 11 senior colleges by as much as \$600 per year from \$4,000 to \$4,600, and would go up by \$400 from \$2,800 to \$3,200 at CUNY’s six community colleges. Earlier this year, CUNY’s Board approved five-figure raises for all of the University’s top officers led by Chancellor Matthew Goldstein whose, base pay was increased from \$395,000 to \$450,000. PHOTO: JAMIE LEHANE

Wilting Wages

MONEY SENT HOME TO MEXICO DECLINES AS U.S. ECONOMY DETERIORATES

BY JENNIFER JANISCH

Gabriel, a middle-aged undocumented Mexican immigrant, sits shivering, hunched over on a plastic crate, his hands shoved into the pockets of his green hooded sweatshirt. He could easily be mistaken for a homeless man, waiting outside an East Harlem pizza parlor on a freezing November afternoon, hoping to score the spare change of a kind-hearted stranger.

Suddenly, he jumps up from his makeshift chair and approaches a grocery cart full of flower bouquets, their hues shockingly bright in the gray rain. He has a customer, his fourth and last sale of the day. With strong brown hands, dry but clean, he trims the red rose stems, carefully wraps the flowers in green tissue paper and hands them over in exchange for eight dollars.

After ten hours of selling flowers, Gabriel will retire to the room he rents by the week with \$40 in his pocket.

“The economy is really down. I’m making less than when I came to this country. It’s not enough,” Gabriel says. “I thought things were going to go well for me in this country, but I’m doing pretty badly.”

The National Bureau of Economic Research recently announced the U.S. economy entered a recession in December 2007. But Mexican immigrants have felt the ever tightening grip of financial hardship for far longer. As construction and service industry jobs dry up, they are sending less money home.

“Before, I used to send \$300 or \$400 every two weeks,” Gabriel says. “Now I’m sending \$200 or \$300 a month.”

Joanna Villacres, a teller at a money transfer office in East Harlem, says immigrants are still sending money home with the same frequency, but that the amount of each money transfer, or remittance, has gone down in recent months.

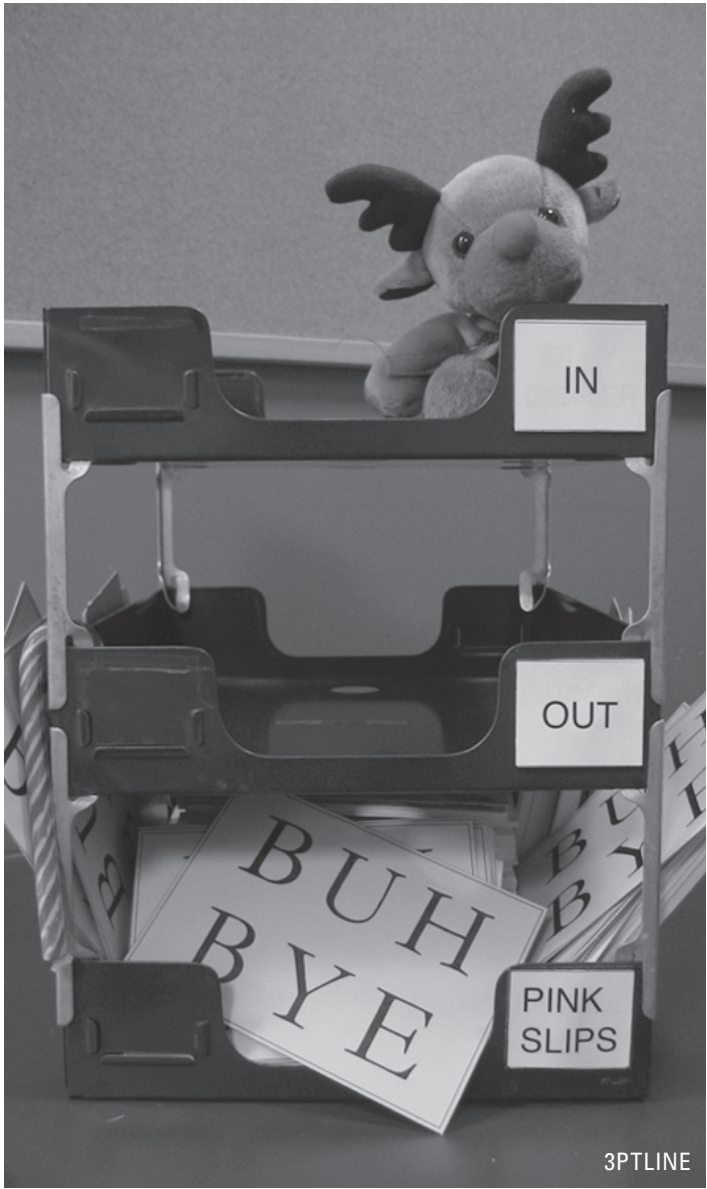
“If they sent \$400 before, they’re sending \$300 or \$150 now,” Villacres says.

Until recently, the amount of money Mexicans in the United States sent home was soaring. But according to a report released last month by the Inter-American Development Bank, remittances are expected to fall from \$24 billion in 2007 to \$23 billion in 2008. Meanwhile, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security has reported declines in border crossings. And this summer, the Center for Immigration Studies estimated that the number of illegal immigrants currently in the United States had declined since August 2007 from 12.5 million to 11.2 million.

“That means trouble for Mexico,” says Fred Rosen, a senior analyst with the North American Congress on Latin America and a former economics professor. “I think there is a general recognition in Mexico ... that if this becomes a really, really deep recession, or even a global depression, that Mexico is going to suffer very, very badly,”

Rosen says although remittances make up 3 percent of Mexico’s gross domestic product, a vast number of Mexican families benefit from and are heavily reliant on the cash they receive from their relatives abroad. He says the economic crisis in the United States will have tremendous ramifications for Mexican families.

“When Uncle Sam sneezes, Mexico catches a cold.”



BY MELODY S. WELLS

Unemployment rates are climbing toward the highest levels in a quarter century. Yet, only 60 percent of eligible New Yorkers are applying for state unemployment insurance benefits, according to Andy Stettner, deputy director of the National Employment Law Project.

“In today’s de-unionized age, a lot of people don’t really have anyone telling them when they’re laid off that they’re eligible for unemployment,” Stettner says. “We’re trying to get more awareness among people who work at food pantries or churches about unemployment benefits so that when people go there they can get the low-down.”

Anyone who has worked in New York State within the last 18 months and who was laid off through no fault of their own, can apply for New York State unemployment benefits that help workers between jobs stave off financial crisis. Immigrants who are legally allowed to work in this country can also receive benefits, regardless of citizenship.

“When you’re laid off, your employer is obligated by law to tell you that you’re able to get unemployment insurance,” Stettner says. “Unfortunately there are no teeth to that law,” he says, but everyone should apply. It’s easy enough — there is an online application at ui.labor.state.ny.us. You can also apply by calling 1-888-209-8124.

You will need your Social Security or work permit ID number, your last employer’s registration number or federal Employer Identification Num-

Tapping the System

HOW TO NAVIGATE NEW YORK’S STRINGENT UNEMPLOYMENT LAW

ber (found on your W-2 tax form) and address and telephone number.

If you are unemployed, you will on average receive about half of what you were being paid at your last job, up to \$405 per week. The formula for calculating unemployment benefits is complicated. The New York State Department of Labor (DOL) will assess your quarterly earnings during the past year and give you a weekly stipend equal to 1/26th of what you made during the quarter you earned the most money. So, if you made \$9,000 in one three-month period, and less than that in every other three-month period, divide \$9,000 by 26. You will receive \$346 per week.

JUMPING THROUGH HOOPS

To keep getting payments, a person must prove, week in and week out, that he or she is “ready, willing and able to work,” according to the DOL website. Detailed records of efforts to find a job, in the form of a daily log of job applications, resumes sent, and phone calls made in the job search process are mandatory. Workers must also prove that they are continually without any employment.

This is where one of the glaring contradictions in the law exists — New York State is the only state, according to Stettner, where a person can be considered “employed” even if they are not making money. For instance, if you’re on unemployment and you write a blog, you can be considered “employed” because you are doing “work” even though you don’t make money. Also, if a worker is found to have received a job offer that pays at least 80 percent of what she or he was previously earning and refused it, she or he may have to repay some unemployment benefits.

Details about these policies can be found at the DOL website, under the “frequent questions” tab or in the handbook sent to you once you are accepted into the unemployment system. Look under “What is considered work” and you will find this definition: “You are considered employed on any day when you perform any services — even an hour or less in self-employment, on a freelance basis or for someone else. It makes no difference whether this work is in covered employment or whether you get paid for that day.”

“It’s a messed-up thing,” Stettner says of the rule regarding unpaid work. “A lot of times they will consider you ‘working’ if you’re volunteering. It’s one of the gray areas [in the state law] that shouldn’t be.”

Similarly, the booklet that every person on unemployment receives in the mail about a week after applying is full of obscure legal language. For instance, a question like “How many days last week were you unable or unwilling to work?” might elicit an answer of “five” when the correct answer should be “zero.”

It’s difficult, but knowing how to decipher the unemployment laws can be an essential skill in a weakening economy. The federal government recently increased unemployment benefits for an additional seven weeks, and since there was an increase earlier this year of 13 weeks, that brings the total time someone can claim unemployment benefits to 46 weeks. Still, unemployment benefits eventually run out, and the long-term unemployment rate are higher than they’ve been for the past 25 years. It’s clear more needs to be done for workers whose jobs have disappeared completely from the marketplace.

The REAL UNEMPLOYMENT RATE

BY MELODY S. WELLS

On Dec. 2, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics released the unemployment rate for November 2008 — 6.7 percent was the number featured in all the news headlines. But was it accurate as a measure of the depressed workforce?

To be frank: not even close. If the BLS wanted to give a truer picture of the way the job market has suffered in this recession, it would include people who’ve given up looking for jobs, people who are working part-time but would rather be working full time, and others not counted in the official number. More and more economists acknowledge that the “official unemployment rate” is only a partial measure of joblessness.

When “discouraged and marginal workers” who have given up looking work are factored in, the unemployment rate increases to 7.8 percent. However, if you count people who are working part-time but want full-time work, the total rate of “labor underutilization” soars to 12.5 percent.

Lawsuit Takes on NYPD Press Credential Policy



DENIED: Independent journalist Rafaél Martínez-Alequin stands at City Hall, showing his old press card, which was not renewed by the New York Police Department in 2007. PHOTO: JOEL COOK

BY ALEX KANE

The New York Police Department’s system for issuing annual press credentials to journalists is unconstitutional and arbitrary, a federal lawsuit filed Nov. 12 alleges.

The lawsuit filed on behalf of three New York City-based journalists whose 2007 applications for press credentials were denied by the NYPD claims that the city’s actions “have resulted in unconstitutional and unlawful interference with and prevention of news coverage in New York City and beyond.” The three journalists all say that the NYPD has not provided justification for why each one was denied press credentials and that the department has not answered their appeals. As a result, the plaintiffs allege violations of their Fourteenth Amendment rights to due process and equal protection under the law.

“The system of granting press credentials in New York City has run amok and needs to be changed immediately,” said Norman Siegel, a prominent civil rights attorney who is leading the lawsuit. “We cannot allow the City of New York, the police department, to trample on the fundamental rights of journalists.”

The lawsuit is challenging the NYPD’s “unconstitutionally vague” criteria for defining who is qualified to carry city-issued press credentials. According to the NYPD’s Office of Deputy Commissioner for Public Information, an applicant must submit three articles that have been published in print media within the last six months and a cover letter from a news director or editor. For individuals publishing largely for online-only news organizations or blogs, the policy seems unclear.

Plaintiff David Wallis is a long-time freelance and online journalist who has contributed to a wide range of publications including the *New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *Esquire*, and the *Village Voice* and has held press credentials on and off since 1994. Wallis is the founder of Featurewell.com, which provides news organizations worldwide the opportunity to purchase articles and photographs from the materials featured on the website.

Wallis questions why the NYPD should be granted the power to decide which journalists are “legitimate” enough to receive city-issued press credentials. “Should they really be in the business of deciding the legitimacy of news organizations?” he said.

Plaintiff Rafaél Martínez-Alequin is a long-time independent print and online journalist who published the *Brooklyn Free Press* from 1983 to 2003 and said he held credentials off and on for nearly 20 years. According to a June 16, 2007, *New York Times* article, over the years he became a well-known reporter

at city press conferences, earning a reputation as a “gadfly” who asked discomfiting questions about race and class to New York politicians. He now blogs at yourfreepress.blogspot.com and edits nycfreepress.com.

Plaintiff Ralph E. Smith publishes GuardianChronicle.com, a blog that focuses primarily on law enforcement issues, community groups and youth in the city. He had held a working press card since 1996.

The city’s request to delay its response to the lawsuit until Jan. 16, 2009 has been granted.

The NYPD’s Public Information Office failed to return several requests for comment by *The Independent*.

A similar lawsuit, filed by the New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU), involves longtime police reporter Leonard Levitt, whose press credential renewal application was denied by the NYPD in January 2007 after he held credentials for 24 years. After working for *Newsday*, The Associated Press and the *New York Post*, Levitt founded NYPDConfidential.com, a website that investigates the police department. NYCLU lawyers have filed a Freedom of Information Act request to examine the city’s standards and procedures for issuing press credentials and to obtain documents about Levitt’s application. The case is pending.

Other New York City-based online-only publications have reported encountering similar troubles. “Since the summer of 2007, we [*Gotham Gazette*] have been denied a press identification card, which would assist us in accessing certain crowded/exclusive City Hall events,” wrote Courtney Gross, the city government editor for GothamGazette.com Nov. 13. “The NYPD’s reason: that we are online only, sans a tangible, ink-stained print publication.”

Gothamist.com publisher and co-founder Jake Dobkin described in an April 27, 2005, online article when he inquired about his application for press credentials, an NYPD employee told the publication “that websites were not eligible for NYPD working press credentials.”

“Access to newsworthy events and things like press passes should go to those who are consistently doing reporting for a real public,” said Jay Rosen, a faculty member in New York University’s Journalism Department and the author of the blog PressThink, in an email to *The Independent*. “It’s the journalism that should make the difference, not the journalist’s background, credentials, or employer.”

To learn how you can apply for New York City-issued press credentials and to read a longer version of this article, visit indypendent.org.



DEMOCRACY NOW!

Independent news hour with Amy Goodman and co-host Juan Gonzalez
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From Baghdad to Brooklyn

MY JOURNEY WITH AN IRAQI REFUGEE

BY JENNIFER UTZ

That one sounds like mortar fire,” Mohamed said. “And that was definitely a sniper.” My Iraqi friend and I were at Coney Island for the summer fireworks. As we rode the Wonder Wheel and listening to the explosions over the water, memories of life in war-torn Iraq inevitably came to mind. Just two weeks before, Mohamed had been a refugee living in the slums of Damascus, Syria.

To date, one in five Iraqis have left their homes. More than 2 million have left the country, and another 2.5 million are internally displaced. After the 2006 bombing of the Shiite mosque in Samarra unleashed a wave of sectarian clashes, those who could afford to do so began fleeing in droves, many choosing to wait out the violence in urban areas of Jordan and Syria, the two countries hosting the most Iraqi refugees.

Mohamed, now 25, lived like most refugees. Unable to work legally in Syria, he relied on the meager savings his parents could send him from Iraq. Over the course of one year, he moved 16 times to a series of filthy, roach-infested, overpriced apartments. It’s a seller’s market. Iraqi refugees are exploited by every crooked landlord who realizes how desperately they don’t want to be sent back.

I first met Mohamed in 2007, when I interviewed him for a video piece on refugees. We became fast friends and during my time working in Syria, we spent our days exploring Damascus together, a city foreign to both of us.

There during the presidential referendum, we found Mohamed’s Western appearance made for some interesting fun. We crashed referendum parties and told revelers we were both from New York City. Everyone from average citizens to high government officials wanted a photo with “the foreigners.” Little did they know, Mohamed was one of the 1.2 million Iraqi refugees placing such a severe economic, social and political burden on their country.

The more I got to know him, the more I wanted to document his story. Yet at the same time, sitting by and simply watching his life unravel didn’t seem right.

I wanted to bring Mohamed to the United States. I took a photo of a bench on the Brooklyn Heights Promenade where one can take in the quintessential view of Manhattan and promised him, “We’ll be sitting there together one day.”

I spent five months in Damascus with Mohamed. Throughout this time I made a good friend and realized the power I have as a U.S. citizen to do my small part to clean up the mess that’s been made in Iraq.

LIFE BEFORE THE INVASION

The son of a diplomat and an attorney, Mohamed lived with his upper middle-class family in a large house in central Baghdad.

Socially, his life resembled that of men his age living in a Western country. As a teenager, he joined a garage rock band. His father begged him to cut his long hair, disapproved of his attire and was incensed when he got a tattoo.

Obsessed with American culture, he

taught himself English by watching American sitcoms and music videos, covering the Arabic subtitles on his television with black tape.

Unfortunately, what passed for teenage antics was not condoned as he came of age, and his American affectations became the subject of suspicion and ridicule. He also had romantic feelings toward men, but coming out was not an option.

Despite being a cultural outsider, life was manageable. Scouted by a modeling agency at 18, he flew to Lebanon and Turkey and had his first taste of life outside a culture he found restrictive. Sipping champagne at fashion industry parties and kissing a man for the first time, he felt truly alive.

Mohamed’s budding modeling career came to an abrupt halt in March of 2003, when, in the middle of his 20th birthday party, his country was invaded and the war began.

In 2005, a note arrived on his family’s front doorstep: “Get your gay son out of the country or we’ll kill the whole family.” Two

Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani called for the killing of homosexuals “in the worst, most severe way possible,” sparking a wave of brutal attacks against homosexuals. Even if the security situation for average citizens were to improve, life for gays in Iraq had become impossible.

I sent Mohamed’s story to a number of influential people. Representatives from Human Rights Watch and Refugees International and openly gay Congresswoman Tammy Baldwin (D-Wisc.) all provided letters of support on his behalf.

I presented Mohamed’s case to a senior representative at UNHCR. The next day, Mohamed received a call — instead of waiting six months for an interview like most Iraqis, he would be seen immediately.

The night before his interview, Mohamed sorted through the pile of documents he’d hastily assembled before his swift departure from Iraq — his passport, personal IDs, modeling contracts and college graduation certificates were the only proof of his

ful story of his two years in exile. Before his final meeting, with the Department of Homeland Security, he realized this moment would shape the rest of his life.

This time, the questions were tougher. “Have you ever had sex with a man?” Mohamed found this too personal to answer. He was also forced to sign the Selective Service registration forms, stating that if there were a draft, he might have to go back and serve in Iraq.

Over the next few months, waiting for the news he desperately wanted to hear, Mohamed’s heart raced every time the phone rang.

GOOD NEWS AND A NEW LIFE

In July 2008, after one and a half years of advocacy, Mohamed was accepted as a refugee. He flew to New York a month later to stay with me in Brooklyn.

The U.S. government provided Mohamed with Medicaid, food stamps, a \$240 stipend, and \$900 toward rent, but only for three months. He had to get acclimated quickly.

Each day, I watched him struggle with bouts of excitement, optimism and fear. After having lived in stagnation for over four years, it was hard to find the motivation and confidence to revisit the dreams he once had.

Five months, a handful of unpaid modeling gigs, and many discouraging interviews later, he finally found work as a receptionist at a large Manhattan performance space. The salary is modest, and it’s not modeling, but he’s grateful for the work.

He also moved to Brooklyn — home is now an 8-foot-by-10-foot room that he shares with another refugee.

MOHAMED IS THE EXCEPTION, NOT THE RULE

In recent months, much has been said in the media about refugees returning to Iraq thanks to the success of “the surge.” In reality, most of those returning are doing so because they’ve either run out of money or their visas have expired. Many of those who return often find that other families have has taken up residence in their homes.

After being criticized for inadequately responding to the crisis, the Bush administration recently began accepting more Iraqi refugees — about 14,000 in 2008. But that’s a drop in the bucket — just a third of 1 percent of the total number of those displaced by a war the United States started.

Today, Mohamed says that without me as an advocate, he could never have done this on his own. As an American and a journalist, I was able bring his plight to the attention of many groups and individuals who could move his case forward quickly, and I could help him navigate the perplexing bureaucracy of being a refugee.

His story is one of many. Mohamed and I sit on “our bench” frequently, taking in the magnificent view of Manhattan and reveling in our victory, but we can’t help remembering all those left behind.

Jennifer Utz is a Brooklyn-based video journalist who has covered the Iraqi refugee crisis at iraqirefugeestories.org since the fall of 2006. A longer version of this article originally appeared on alternet.org.



STARTING A NEW LIFE: Mohamed, an Iraq War refugee, tours Coney Island with Brooklyn-based videojournalist Jennifer Utz. Mohamed was forced to flee Iraq in 2005 during a wave of anti-gay violence. He lived in Syria for three years where he met Utz, who helped guide him through the resettlement process. PHOTO COURTESY: JENNIFER UTZ

weeks later, Mohamed’s tearful mother put him on a plane.

SEEKING ASYLUM, PLEADING FOR HIS LIFE

When refugees arrive in a host country, they can register with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), after which they submit to a series of interviews.

UNHCR monitors and distributes aid to refugee populations. In rare cases, UNHCR refers them to another country for resettlement. This would be our ultimate goal for Mohamed.

I encouraged him to open up about his homosexuality, since it was pertinent to his case. In the October 2005, Iraq’s Grand

former life.

Here he was — preparing to meet with a complete stranger working for an enormous bureaucratic organization, to plead for his life.

Mohamed went through four UNHCR interviews and ultimately was recommended for resettlement to the United States. It was cause for celebration, but certainly not the end of the road. He spent the next eight months anxiously waiting to meet with representatives from the United States.

These multiple “life interviews” were humiliating and exhausting. Mohamed interviewed four times with the State Department, repeatedly recounting the pain-

FEMALE PRIESTS ALTAR THE RULES

By KATRIN REDFERN

On Nov. 22, Fr. Roy Bourgeois addressed 12,000 people gathered outside Fort Benning, Ga., to protest the Pentagon’s training of Latin American militaries. It was the nineteenth year in a row Bourgeois was present at the School of the Americas Watch demonstration he founded in 1990. But this year was different. It was his first appearance as a layperson, not as a priest.

Bourgeois had recently been excommunicated by the Vatican for participating in the ordination of a woman, Janice Sevre-Duszynska, as a Roman Catholic priest on Aug. 9. At a ceremony in Lexington, Ky., Bourgeois acted as a concelebrant and homilist, the first time “a male Roman Catholic priest in good standing publicly joined the ceremony,” according to the *National Catholic Reporter*.

Noting that he met Sevre-Duszynska through the School of the Americas Watch movement, Bourgeois said in his homily, “Just as soldiers in Latin America ... abuse their power and control others, it saddens me to see the hierarchy of our church abusing their power and causing so much suffering among women. Jesus was a healer, a peacemaker, who called everyone into the circle as equals.”

According to Bourgeois, he received a letter from the Vatican’s doctrinal watchdog group dated Oct. 21, “giving me 30 days to recant my belief and public statements that support the ordination of women in our Church, or I will be excommunicated.”

arrested for interrupting Catholic ordination ceremonies in several states in order to plead for women’s ordination. She disrupted a Lexington ordination in 1998 to ask then-Bishop J. Kendrick Williams to make her a priest, but he refused. In 2000, she went to a conference in Washington, D.C., where she grabbed the microphone and called for the ordination of women. Two years later she was arrested in Atlanta, Ga., after protesting the ordination of deacons. At these events, Sevre-Duszynska donned priestly robes and a purple stole to symbolize the lost gifts of women.

“If you’re going to refer to God in human terms,” Sevre-Duszynska said to the *The Independent*, “you better have a balance of feminine and masculine because ... this affects our psychology, our self-esteem, and it creates problems for women and it creates problems for men. It empowers men and disempowers women. It’s not healthy.”

CHURCH POLICY

Catholic Church policy has long insisted that Jesus’s choice of 12 men to be his apostles disqualifies women from the priesthood. Hopes grew during the 1970s that the Vatican would relax its position on female ordination, but the church has remained unbending in its stance throughout the past three decades under the leadership of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI.

According to Aisha Taylor, executive director of the Women’s Ordination Conference, the oldest and largest organization advocating female priests, the ordination movement



EXCLUDED FOR BEING INCLUSIVE: Fr. Roy Bourgeois (center) participates in the ordination of Janice Sevre-Duszynska (seated, center) as a Roman Catholic priest Aug. 9. He has since been excommunicated from the church for his actions. PHOTO: BOB WATKINS

THE DANUBE 7

Bourgeois’s actions have heightened the visibility of a small, but growing, group of female priests that has emerged since seven women were ordained on the Danube River between Germany and Austria in 2002. The “Danube 7” were ordained by Rómulo Antonio Braschi, an independent bishop who broke with the Catholic hierarchy in the 1970s. It is now estimated that there are about 50 women priests and deacons worldwide and a handful of female bishops. Sevre-Duszynska is one of 35 women in the United States who have been ordained in the past two years.

For Sevre-Duszynska, 58, ordination was the culmination of a lifelong struggle to be treated as an equal in the Catholic Church. Growing up on Milwaukee’s south side, she attended Mass “wanting to hear feminine images of God” and sought to become an altar girl, but instead was given the task of cleaning the dressing room where priests prepared before Mass.

In recent years, Sevre-Duszynska has been

began when Catholic women realized they would have to act on their own.

“We’ve tried dialogue, tried to go about it in every other way. We have to go to extreme measures,” Taylor said. “How do we do it differently? How do we change the structures and not just ordain women into the same secretive, nontransparent and unaccountable structure where the clergy sexual abuse crisis was able to happen?”

The women priests movement emphasizes building a more inclusive church and that reforming spirit is evident in its welcoming of priests regardless of their marital status or sexual orientation.

“It wasn’t just adding women and stirring. We incorporate the reforms we’ve been talking about all these years,” said Sevre-Duszynska. “We do not take a vow of obedience to our bishop. It’s not just about getting us ordained.”

For more, see romancatholicwomenpriests.org.

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OBAMANOMICS: Why the Stimulus Plan Will Not Revive the Economy

By ARUN GUPTA

Shortly after his Jan. 20 inauguration, if all goes according to plan, President Barack Obama will submit an economic stimulus plan to Congress. The plan will be of such historic proportions that the media will compare it incessantly to the New Deal; it will probably come with an eye-popping price tag of more than \$500 billion; free-market ideologues will wail about the end of capitalism but will be almost powerless to stop it; Congress will jockey to lard it with pet projects as the price of approval.

And like the New Deal, Obama's stimulus plan will almost certainly fail to pull the economy out of a historic free-fall. For one, the plan is inadequate. Two, it will be drafted and overseen by Obama's economic "dream team," who are committed to the failed ideology that got us into this mess. Three, there's the matter of the still-festering financial crisis. And four, there has been no national debate over economic priorities such as who controls the economy, how production should be structured and what should be produced.

Because of these factors, the stimulus plan will be designed to benefit specific industrial and financial sectors, not the public. If the downturn proves vicious and long-lived, the government will have to introduce even more dramatic economic programs and policies, just like during the Great Depression.

The silver lining is that a failed stimulus will open up organizing opportunities around socializing wealth, such as universal single-payer healthcare or subsidized housing; expanding the notion of what is a public utility, such as banking or energy; and rethinking how production is structured, a process that is already happening with the automobile industry bailout plan.

Right now the hype over a stimulus plan is at a fever pitch, and supplicants from industries of all sorts to local governments of all sizes have lined up hats in hand. The plan's key components are taking shape: a middle-class tax cut; aid to local governments, especially to the 41 states expected to run budget deficits in 2009; an extension of unemployment benefits and expanded access to food stamps; up to \$40 billion to cover state shortfalls in Medicaid; and around \$150 billion for municipal and state infrastructure projects, mainly roads and bridges, but also ports, airports, mass transit, waterworks, sewers and schools.

The centerpiece will be a "green recovery" plan, perhaps \$100 billion, and will likely be a hodgepodge of initiatives ranging from green construction, weatherizing old homes and building a national electricity transmission and distribution grid to subsidizing wind and solar power, hybrid cars and mass transit systems.

HOPES FOR 'ZERO GROWTH'

But it's too little too late. A \$700 billion plan over two years amounts to barely 2.5 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP). In November Goldman Sachs estimated the economy would shrink at an annual rate of 5 percent in the fourth quarter of 2008. As bad as that is, the New Year will be uglier as the retail sector gets walloped by a dismal holiday shopping season. So 5 percent of the GDP may be a reasonable benchmark for

a stimulus. Add to that the 2 percent the U.S. economy needs to grow every year to keep pace with inflation and population growth, and the growth gap may be nearly 7 percent or close to \$1 trillion of annual economic activity.

Another reason to be skeptical is the claim that a stimulus will "save or create 2.5 million jobs" over two years. There is no way to measure if a job has been saved. It doesn't inspire confidence if an Obama White House is trying to cook the books before there is even a plan on paper. Conservative pundit George Will asks correctly, "How will anyone calculate the number of jobs 'saved'? In what sense saved? Saved from what? Saved by what?"

Let's give Obama the benefit of the doubt and assume his plan creates 2.5 million jobs. It's still spitting in the wind. Every year, the U.S. economy has to add about 1.8 million jobs to keep up with the net surplus of new workers entering the job force. The recession started in December 2007, and jobs began evaporating in January 2008. With more than 2 million jobs projected to be lost in 2008, the deficit is about 4 million jobs this year. Some 3.6 million jobs will be needed to keep up with workforce growth in 2009 and 2010, and with job losses running at 400,000 per month recently, the actual total of jobs needed by 2011 may be well in excess of 10 million, which dwarfs the 2.5 million goal.

REWARDING FAILURE

Then there is the issue of who will manage the economy. Barack Obama is not just retaining some of the key personnel of the Bush administration, such as Defense Secretary Robert Gates, he's also keeping one of the key management principles of the Bush years: rewarding failure.

Not that anyone noticed. Wall Street, academics, pundits and the corporate media — including the *Wall Street Journal*, Fox News and Karl Rove — have been writing Obama mash notes, praising his "dream team." Some progressives grumbled at the roster of anti-tax, pro-deregulation proponents, but consoled themselves that the reviled Larry Summers was not asked to be secretary of the Treasury.

But this is cold comfort. Stephen Dubner, co-author of *Freakanomics*, calls Summers, tapped to be the director of the White House National Economic Council, "the general who conducts the campaign." Summers mentored Timothy Geithner, Obama's choice for Treasury secretary, during the Clinton years when both served in the Treasury Department, and the two were disciples of Robert Rubin, who hailed from Goldman Sachs.

These days, Rubin, Summers and Geithner are credited with managing the global economy through the turbulent nineties, including the Mexican, East Asian, Russian and Latin American financial crises. This narrative glosses over the role they played in forcing countries, particularly in Asia, to liberalize financial flows.

A *New York Times* account from February 1999 noted: "It was American officials who pushed for the financial liberalization that nurtured the speculation (even if developing nations themselves welcomed it). And it was American bankers and money managers who

poured billions of dollars into those emerging markets. Then, when the crisis hit, American officials insisted on tough measures like budget cuts and high interest rates, which many economists argue made things worse."

Summers and Rubin were the point men for liberalization, which led to the rise of oligarchic billionaires and financial panics that saw huge outflows of funds, currency devaluations, mass impoverishment and Western capital sweeping in to cherry-pick industries at fire-sale prices.

In the late 1990s, Summers joined with Rubin and then Federal Reserve chairman Alan Greenspan to aggressively block the U.S. government from regulating derivatives. These are the financial products, such as credit default swaps, at the center of today's economic storm.

SECRETARY OF BAILOUTS

In picking Tim Geithner to be his Treasury secretary, Obama is choosing someone whose record of late as president of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York is a compendium of catastrophe. Geithner's role at the New York Fed has landed him in the heart of every big financial bailout in 2008, earning him the title of the "secretary of bailouts." But even before these botched operations, *The New Republic* notes, Geithner failed to take action after evidence started accumulating in 2007 that "U.S. banks were undercapitalized."

In March 2008, Geithner helped kill off Bear Stearns, handing the carcass to JPMorgan Chase for a song, while the New York Fed swallowed about \$29 billion in toxic securities that have lost \$2.7 billion on paper so far. *Portfolio Magazine* said he "got suckered by Wall Street" because of the lopsided deal and detailed many of the chummy associations Geithner has with Wall Street honchos whose firms profited from the Bear Stearns deal, including the omnipresent Goldman Sachs.

After deciding that Bear was too big to

fail, Geithner and current Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson (also of Goldman Sachs) let Lehman Brothers collapse in September. Within 24 hours the contagion spread to money market funds. They were roiled after one fund "broke the buck," leading to a freeze in commercial paper purchases, a critical tool for financing business operations. And the Fed and Treasury had to step in to save insurance giant AIG because of its exposure to Lehman debt.

The *Wall Street Journal* observed, "Mr. Geithner was the driving force behind the government takeover of insurance giant AIG — a 'rescue' that has itself twice had to be rescued with more taxpayer capital." The government lifeline to AIG is at \$150 billion and rising, because there is no coherent rescue plan. Most recently, AIG announced it faces about \$10 billion more in losses linked to credit default swaps not covered by any of the bailout plans already enacted.

Most recently, Geithner has done some lifting for his old boss Rubin, who is a top player at Citigroup. The government has had to bail out the Citigroup bailout, upping its ante to \$45 billion while promising to backstop about a quarter trillion in troubled assets.

THE VOLCKER SHOCK

Another suspect figure joining the Obama team is Paul Volcker, a former Federal Reserve chairman who has been chosen to head the new Economic Recovery Advisory Board. Volcker has been given a free pass by the media because he hasn't been as slavish as Greenspan in his devotion to the free markets. But Volcker played a critical role in ushering in neoliberalism in the late 1970s.

Volcker engineered a dramatic shift in economic policy from guaranteeing full employment to fighting inflation using massive increases in interest rates. High inflation was slashed but the result was deindustrialization, unemployment rates above 10 percent, a severe recession and the weakening of organized labor. High interest rates benefited creditors and shareholders. The share of income held by the top one percent soared from a historic low of 23 percent in the mid-seventies to about 35 percent by 1985. High interest rates also crippled developing nations as debt payments soared. In turn, this set the

stage for IMF-engineered structural adjustment programs that conditioned aid to nations sliding toward bankruptcy with demands of draconian cuts in education, and health and social services, wholesale privatization and trade and financial liberalization.

Conservatives are also pleased that Obama appointed Christina Romer to chair his Council of Economic Advisors because she is known for academic work that concluded tax cuts are a powerful economic stimulus.

Summers, Geithner, Romer and Volcker's history is not just of academic interest. Obama's dream team may look to raid social security and Medicare to pay for ballooning deficits. In September, Summers wrote in the *Washington Post*, "We still must address issues of entitlements and fiscal sustainability." This is code word for slashing social welfare.

NO DEBATE

Because Obama is committed to neoliberal policies, he is shying away from any debate. Talking about economic priorities means talking about winners or losers.

For instance, the lack of open debate has pushed the auto industry to the edge. While the executives and shareholders of the Big Three should be kicked to the curb, letting the companies fail could drag under auto-parts suppliers, dealerships and U.S.-based foreign auto plants, resulting in more than a million jobs lost.

The auto industry is to blame for its ramshackle state, but unions are being cast as scapegoats. Labor costs are not the reason General Motors may go under. It's because it chose to continue building SUVs even as gas prices crept up for years.

Mandating hybrid technology and high gas mileage is a given, but many consumers may rekindle their love affair with gas-guzzlers now that oil prices have tanked. Green car technology should be combined with a tax on oil that keeps it above \$100 a barrel. The revenue could help address the climate crisis, but Big Oil would fight it to the death. And Wall Street and the Democrats are preparing a cap-and-trade scheme in carbon emissions. It won't reduce greenhouse gases, but it could inflate a huge new speculative bubble.

Without open debate, economic policies will be designed for powerful business interests to profit from. The way out of this mess is to address 30 years of declining wages and benefits, reducing foreign trade imbalances and giving developing countries the space to get off the commodity and export-oriented production treadmill.

Obama's plan may help some parts of the country and some industries and stave off a depression, but it won't create a just economy for the future. Just like the 1930s, real change has to come from below.

Yes We Can!

While Wall Street is recoiling from the economic blow and politicians are arguing on Capitol Hill, average Americans are taking matters into their own hands. Here are some of their stories:

TAKING A STAND

Many people facing immediate eviction in the Boston area have received unexpected support in the form of a human blockade. A group of activists from the group City Life/Vida Urbana have mobilized in front of foreclosed homes in the last several months in support of residents. Less than 12 hours after Barack Obama was elected, the group organized to help an African-American family in Boston's Mattapan neighborhood. The group criticizes banks such as Bank of America, Countrywide Mortgage and JPMorgan Chase that own mortgages on homes where families in financial distress are striving to meet monthly housing payments. "It's a bittersweet time, you know, because Obama's theme was 'yes we can, we can fight against injustice,'" said housing and tenants rights activist James Brooks, "and the banks are saying 'no you can't.'"



CityLife/Vida Urbana

WORKERS SIT DOWN

In Chicago, some 200 laid-off union workers with United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America Local 1110 won a \$1.75 million settlement after occupying their shuttered factory for six days. The showdown began in early December when their employer Republic Windows and Doors gave them three days notice that their plant was closing. Protesting that the company did not give them 60 days notice of a mass layoff as required by federal law and demanding owed vacation pay, the workers took over the factory Dec. 5. An outpouring of support from across the country ensued, forcing the company and its lead creditor Bank of America to meet the workers' demands. The factory occupation mirrors direct action taken by workers in the 1930s to push for union recognition and better pay and working conditions.



Max Rameau

RIGHT TO A NEW HOME

Miami housing activist Max Rameau sees the economic crisis as an opportunity for the city's homeless. As thousands of homes sit empty after foreclosure, Rameau takes it upon himself to open them up and find a family to move inside. Thanks to a once-booming condo market, Florida has the nation's second-highest foreclosure rate, with one in every 178 homes in default, according to the Associated Press. While individuals around the country are quietly squatting vacant homes, Rameau has taken the issue public, saying, "Homeless people across the country are squatting in empty homes. The question is: Is this going to be done out of desperation or with direction?"

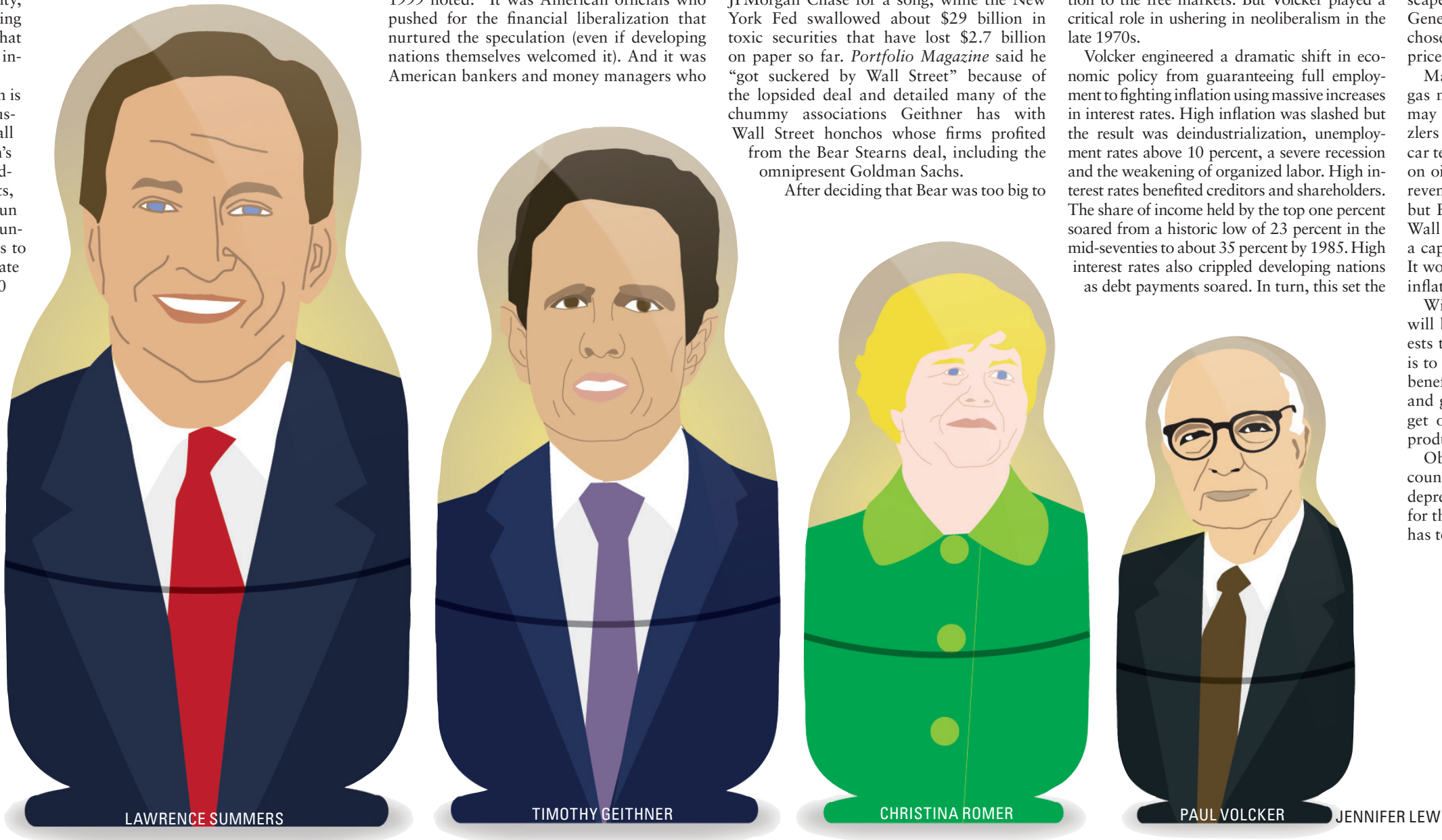


Jocelyne Voltaire

MAKING A BID

When the foreclosed home of single mother Jocelyne Voltaire headed for the auction block Oct. 17, a coalition of women was there to help her out. Once CODEPINK, a national peace action group, heard about Voltaire's case in Queens Village, New York, the group rallied its base and raised the \$30,000 needed to save her home. Voltaire, a mother of four and a victim of a predatory loan, suffered the loss of her eldest son earlier this year while he was serving with the U.S. Marine Corps in the Middle East.

—JESSICA LEE



LAWRENCE SUMMERS

TIMOTHY GEITHNER

CHRISTINA ROMER

PAUL VOLCKER

JENNIFER LEW



BY JEREMY SCAHILL

U.S. policy is not about one individual, and no matter how much faith people place in President-elect Barack Obama, the policies he enacts will be fruit of a tree with many roots. But the best immediate indicator of what an Obama administration might look like can be found in the people he surrounds himself with and who he appoints to his Cabinet. And, frankly, when it comes to foreign policy, it is not looking good.

Obama has a momentous opportunity to do what he repeatedly promised over the course of his campaign: bring actual change. But the more we learn about who Obama is considering for top positions in his administration, the more his inner circle resembles a staff reunion of hawkish, old-guard Democrats of the 1990s. Even more disturbing, several of the individuals at the

Zeroing in on Obama’s Hawks

center of Obama’s transition and emerging foreign policy teams were top players in creating and implementing foreign policies that would pave the way for projects eventually carried out under the Bush/Cheney administration. Here’s a few of the members who will help shape U.S. foreign policy for at least four years.

VICE PRESIDENT-ELECT JOE BIDEN

Much has been written on Biden’s tenure as head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, but his role in the invasion and occupation of Iraq stands out. In the summer of 2002, when the United States was “debating” a potential attack on Iraq, Biden presided over hearings whose ostensible purpose was to weigh all existing options. Biden’s hearings treated the invasion as a foregone conclusion. His refusal to call on two individuals in particular ensured that testimony that could have proven invaluable to an actual debate was never heard: Former Chief U.N. Weapons Inspector Scott Ritter and Hans von Sponeck, a 32-year veteran diplomat and the former head of the U.N.’s Iraq program.

MARTIN INDYK

Founder of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Indyk spent years working for the American Israel Public Affairs Committee and served as Clinton’s ambassador to Israel and assistant secretary of state for Near East affairs, while also playing a major role in developing U.S. policy toward Iraq and Iran.

ANTHONY LAKE

Clinton’s former national security advisor, Lake began his foreign policy work in the U.S. Foreign Service during Vietnam, working with Henry Kissinger on the “September Group,” a secret team tasked with developing a military strategy to deliver a “savage, decisive blow against North Vietnam.” Decades later, after working for various administrations, Lake “was the main force behind the U.S. invasion of Haiti in the mid-Clinton years,” according to veteran journalist Allan Nairn, whose groundbreaking reporting revealed U.S. support for Haitian death squads in the 1990s.



SUSAN RICE

Former Assistant Secretary of State Susan Rice, who served on Clinton’s National Security Council, was nominated as Obama’s ambassador to the United Nations. She, like Secretary of State-designate Hillary Clinton and others at the top of Obama’s foreign policy team, promoted the myth that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). Rice has also been a passionate advocate for a U.S. military attack against Sudan over the Darfur crisis.

JOHN BRENNAN

A longtime CIA official and former head of the National Counterterrorism Center, Brennan is one of the coordinators of Obama’s intelligence transition team and, until he recently withdrew his name from consideration, was a top contender for either CIA director or director of national intelligence. He

was also recently described by Glenn Gre-enwald as “an ardent supporter of torture and one of the most emphatic advocates of Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act spying expansions and telecom immunity.” Brennan has described the CIA’s extraordinary rendition program — the government-run kidnap-and-torture program enacted under Clinton — as an absolutely vital tool.

JAMI MISCIK

Miscik, who works alongside Brennan on Obama’s transitional team, was the CIA’s Deputy Director for Intelligence in the run-up to the Iraq War. She was one of the key officials responsible for sidelining intel that contradicted the official line on WMDs, while promoting intel that backed it up.



RAHM EMANUEL

A former senior Clinton advisor, Emanuel is a hard-line supporter of Israel’s “targeted assassination” policy and actually volunteered to work with the Israeli Army during the 1991 Gulf War. He voted for the invasion of Iraq and, unlike many of his colleagues, Emanuel still defends his vote. As Philip Giraldi recently pointed out on Antiwar.com, Emanuel “advocates increasing the size of the U.S. Army by 100,000 soldiers and creating a domestic spying organization like Britain’s MI5.” Under Clinton, Emanuel was one of the key people to helped pass the North American Free Trade Agreement.

MICHELE FLOURNOY

Flournoy and former Clinton Deputy Defense Secretary John White are co-heading Obama’s defense transition team. Flournoy was a senior Clinton appointee at the Pentagon and currently runs the Center for a New American Security (CNAS), a center-right think-tank. As the *Wall Street Journal* recently reported: “While at CNAS, Flournoy helped to write a report that called for reducing the open-ended American military commitment in Iraq and replacing it with a policy of ‘conditional engagement’ there.”

OBAMA’S MILITANT PLATFORM:

With the assistance of his foreign policy team, Obama has already charted out several hawkish stances. Among them:

- His plan to escalate the war in Afghanistan;
- An Iraq plan that could turn into a down-sized and rebranded occupation that keeps U.S. forces in Iraq for the foreseeable future;
- His labeling of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard a “terrorist organization”;
- His pledge to use unilateral force inside Pakistan to defend U.S. interests;
- His position, presented before the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, that Jerusalem “must remain undivided”;
- His plan to continue the “War on Drugs,” a backdoor U.S. counterinsurgency campaign in Central and Latin America;
- His refusal to “rule out” using Blackwater and other private armed forces in U.S. war zones, despite previously introducing legislation to regulate these companies and bring them under U.S. law.

This article was adapted from, “This is Change? 20 Hawks, Clintonites and Neons to Watch for in Obama’s White House,” published on alternet.org Nov. 20.

TAKING ON THE PENTAGON

BY FRIDA BERRIGAN

Even saddled with a two-front, budget-busting war and a collapsing economy, President-elect Barack Obama may be able to accomplish a lot. For all the rolling up of sleeves and “everything is going to change” exuberance, however, taking on the Pentagon, with its mega-budget and its mega-power, may be the hardest task he faces.

To cut the military budget deeply means taking on something fundamental and far-reaching: America’s place in the world. It means coming to grips with how we garrison the planet, with how we use our military to project influence and power anywhere in the world, with our attitudes toward international treaties and agreements, with our vast passels of real estate in foreign lands, and, of course, with our economic and political relationships with clients and competitors.

As a candidate, Obama stirred our imagination through his calls for a “new era of international cooperation.” The United States cannot, however, cooperate with other nations from atop our shining Green Zone on the hill; we cannot cooperate as the world’s sole superpower, policeman, cowboy, hyperpower, or whatever the imperial nom du jour turns out to be. Bottom line: we cannot genuinely and effectively cooperate while spending more on what we like to call “security” than the next 45 nations combined.

A new era in Pentagon spending would have to begin with a recognition that enduring security is not attained by threat or fiat, nor is it bought with staggering billions of dollars. It is built with other nations. Weapons come second.

Frida Berrigan is a Senior Program Associate at the New America Foundation’s Arms and Security Initiative and a columnist for Foreign Policy in Focus. This was excerpted from the article, “Weapons Come Second: Can Obama Take on the Pentagon?” published Nov. 25.

BY THE NUMBERS

- 60** Percent increase in military spending under the Bush administration, not including the spending on wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.
- \$300 billion** Military spending budget when Bush set foot in the White House in 2001.
- \$541 billion** Military spending budget when Obama sets foot in the White House, not including the spending on wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.
- \$170 billion** Price tag for military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan in 2009.
- #1** U.S. military spending. Its nearest competitor, China, spends one-sixth as much on its military.
- 48** Total percent of the global military spending compared to all other nations, that the U.S. accounts for (International Institute for Strategic Studies).
- \$864 billion** Total spent on military activities associated with the “Global War on Terror” since 2001.
- 4** Percent of the total gross domestic product (GDP) that should be generated by defense spending, as argued by weapons manufacturing industries.
- 65,000** Number of new U.S. Army recruits that Obama and Defense Secretary Robert Gates are calling for to energize a military force worn out by war.
- 18** Number of months Obama has said he will wait before cutting the defense budget, citing his need for a better grip on the national security situation. —F.B.

Sources: Center for Arms Control and Non-proliferation, Wall Street Journal, Congressional Research Service, AirGuide Business, DoD Buzz.



ECUADOR DROPS THE MONEY BALL

BY DANIEL DENVIR

QUITO, Ecuador—Amidst the spreading global financial crisis, a special debt audit commission released a report on Nov. 20 charging that much of Ecuador’s foreign debt was illegitimate or illegal.

“We could not only sanction those who are to blame, but also stop paying the illegitimate debt,” said Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa at a ceremony where he presented the findings of the commission, which he appointed.

The commission recommended that Ecuador default on \$3.9 billion in foreign commercial debts — Global Bonds 2012, 2015 and 2030 — the result of debts restructured in 2000 after the country’s 1999 default.

Although Ecuador currently has the capacity to pay, dropping oil prices and squeezed credit markets are putting President Rafael Correa’s plans to boost spending on education and health care in jeopardy. Correa has pledged to prioritize the “social debt” over debt to foreign creditors.

As of August, Ecuador’s total foreign debt was \$10.3 billion, or 21 percent of its gross domestic product. Just one-fifth of those bonds were issued to raise money for development, while the rest correspond to refinancing costs, according to Hugo Arias, the debt audit commission’s coordinator.

Correa, a U.S.-trained economist, has threatened to default on the debt since he campaigned for the presidency in 2006.

THE CITIGROUP CONNECTION

The commission accused Salomon Smith Barney, now part of Citigroup, of handling the 2000 restructuring without Ecuador’s authorization, leading to the application of 10 and 12 percent interest rates. The commission evaluated all commercial, multilateral, government-to-government and domestic debt from 1976 to 2006.

Commercial debt, or debt to private banks, made up 44 percent of Ecuador’s interest payments in 2007, considerably more than the 27 percent paid to multilateral institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF). But the report also lambasted

multilateral debt, saying that many IMF and World Bank loans were used to advance the interests of transnational corporations. Ecuador’s military dictatorship (1974-1979) was the first government to lead the country into indebtedness.

The commission found that usurious interest rates were applied for many bonds and that past Ecuadorian governments illegally took on other loans. Debt restructurings consistently forced Ecuador to take on more foreign debt to pay outstanding debt, and often at much higher interest rates. The commission also charged that the U.S. Federal Reserve’s late 1970s interest rate hikes constituted a “unilateral” increase in global rates, compounding Ecuador’s indebtedness.

If President Correa follows the commission’s recommendations — which is far from a certainty — Ecuador could default on some portion of its foreign debt, becoming the first Latin American country to do so since Argentina in 2001.

But despite all the hints at a default, it seems likely that Ecuador will use the commission’s report as leverage for restructuring the country’s debt. Commission president Ricardo Patiño indicated as much to *Bloomberg News*, but said that Ecuador would not settle for a 60 percent reduction, a number that had earlier been mentioned.

Ecuador announced that it would delay paying \$30.6 million in interest on the Global Bonus 2012, taking advantage of a month-long grace period. The announcement sent the global financial universe into a panic, with Standard and Poor’s cutting Ecuador’s risk rating to CCC-.

Social movements have long alleged that corrupt former governments illegally negotiated loans for their own personal financial gain.

Significantly, the commission singled out foreign debt for being “illegitimate” rather than simply illegal. Social movements have long declared most foreign debt to be illegitimate, but Ecuador’s use of legitimacy as a legal argument for defaulting would set a major precedent; indeed, the mere formation of a debt auditing commission does so. Osvaldo Leon, of the Latin American Informa-

tion Agency (ALAI), says that it remains to be seen if other countries in Latin America will follow suit.

Ecuador’s findings could set an important precedent for the poorest of indebted countries, whose debt burden has long been criticized as inhumane.

Pablo Davalos, an economist and fierce social movement critic of Correa, has said that the report will in the end only amount to political posturing. Correa has criticized the foreign debt since his brief 2005 stint as Finance Minister — but has faithfully made each and every payment since his 2006 election. Correa has also made peace with oil and mining companies after acrimonious, high-profile negotiations. In response, social movements have accused Correa of being overly friendly to business. The foreign press, and the business press in particular, regularly exaggerates Correa’s radicalism.

It is also important to emphasize that Argentina’s 2001 default did not hamper the country’s economic recovery — in fact, it gave it a strong boost.

Former Constituent Assembly President Alberto Acosta echoed Correa, saying that the proposal could provide the legal basis for the prosecution of Ecuadorian officials involved in the negotiation of illegal or illegitimate debt. He also said that it was perfectly reasonable to take a debt’s legitimacy into account.

“The United States itself has embraced the concept of illegitimate foreign debt in encouraging countries to forgive the debt accrued in Iraq under Saddam Hussein,” Acosta said.

In fact, the United States originated the concept of illegitimate foreign debt after the Spanish-American War. The United States refused to pay Cuba’s outstanding debt to Spain, arguing that it was created by agents of Spain in Spain’s self-interest, a matter in which Cubans had no say.

This article was adapted from “As Crisis Mounts, Ecuador Declares Foreign Debt Illegitimate and Illegal,” published Nov. 26 on alternet.org.

int’l briefs

U.S. SAYS YES TO CLUSTER BOMBS

The United States has refused to join more than 90 countries in December in signing the Convention on Cluster Munitions, which bans the use, stockpiling and trade of a weapon that has killed or injured tens of thousands of civilians. Cluster bombs explode in mid-air, dispersing smaller bomblets which can fail to explode on impact. The bomblets remain potentially lethal on the ground, posing a danger to civilians and render agricultural land unusable. The United States last used cluster bombs in Afghanistan in 2001 and in the invasion of Iraq in 2003, when coalition forces dropped an estimated 1.8 million bomblets. The United States has instead pledged to implement a policy to improve the reliability of bomblets, so only 1 percent fail to explode on impact, by 2018.



VIOLENCE SPREADS IN PALESTINE

Israeli airstrikes in Southern Gaza killed two Palestinian teenagers and a third man was shot by Israeli soldiers in the West Bank Dec 2. Israeli settlers wounded three Palestinians during a non-violent protest in the town of Bil’in while dozens of Palestinian homes and businesses were attacked across the West Bank. The violence came in response to the eviction of 250 Jewish settlers from a disputed house in Hebron, Israel. Premier Olmert declared that he was “ashamed” by the “pogrom.” In Gaza, Israel lifted its four-week ban on journalists and aid workers, although the United Nations describes conditions there as the “worst ever.” The Association for Civil Rights in Israel and U.N. General Assembly President Miguel d’Escoto Brockman equated Israeli policies to apartheid, while d’Escoto Brockman called for “boycott, divestment and sanctions.” To read interviews about the situation, visit indypendent.org.

ONLINE REPORTERS BEHIND BARS

Online journalists are imprisoned in greater numbers than journalists in other mediums, a new report from the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) says. The annual study found that of the 125 imprisoned journalists around the world Dec. 1, 56 publish on the Internet. The CPJ said this was the first time the number of online journalists jailed surpassed that of imprisoned print journalists, which is currently at 53. China was the world’s worst offender, where, out of 28 incarcerated journalists, 24 publish online. “The future of journalism is online and we are now in a battle with the enemies of press freedom,” said CPJ Executive Director Joel Simon.

CHEVRON OFF THE HOOK IN NIGERIA

Oil giant Chevron was acquitted by a San Francisco federal jury Dec. 2 for alleged human rights abuses in Nigeria. In May 1998, Nigerian military forces opened fire on unarmed demonstrators occupying an off-shore oil drilling platform in protest of environmental devastation caused by Chevron’s operations in the Niger Delta. Two people were killed and two others were wounded in the attack. The lawsuit alleges that police forces were flown to the platform in Chevron helicopters. Chevron argued it did not know the Nigerian military would use excessive force in spite of its well-known history of human rights violations. A Nigerian newspaper reported that while Chevron was in court Nov. 20, police forces shot into a peaceful protest against the company in the Nigerian town of Warri.

Climate Change Exhibit Falls Gravely Short

Climate Change: The Threat to Life and A New Energy Future
AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY
ONGOING THROUGH AUG. 16, 2009
CENTRAL PARK WEST AT 79TH STREET

The American Museum of Natural History has taken a stand in the debate on climate change. It's about time that a premier science museum has stepped forward to present to the public what scientists have been sure about for decades.

The exhibit, "Climate Change: The Threat to Life and A New Energy Future," should be commended for its dynamite mixed-media scientific displays that explain how global warming is responsible for the drastic changes taking place across the world. The growing crisis, however, cannot be deciphered solely through disengaged scientific means, but must rather be presented within the historical context of a social, economic and political legacy.

It's true that the exhibit's introduction better examines the root causes of climate change than Al Gore's 2006 ice-breaking film, *An Inconvenient Truth*. A basket of coal greets the viewer in the first few steps, with a sign reading, "Rock that burns had begun a revolution." Red neon tubing stretches up the wall, graphically depicting the rise in carbon levels to alarming levels in the atmosphere in 50-year increments from 1600 to the dramatic levels of 2000. Beneath the line, a collage of black-and-white images indicates landmarks in technological progress, from the steam engine to the automobile to the airplane. This display, entitled, "Handwriting on the Wall," leaves no room for dispute: Climate change is directly related to the energy demands of a coal-fueled Industrial Revolution throughout the last 150 years. This message would have been politically incorrect just ten years ago (and still is in the Bush administration and Sarah Palin's Alaska). Unfortunately, the exhibit fails to delve much deeper.

"Where we are is because of the Industrial Revolution," said lead curator Dr. Edmond Mathez in a telephone interview. "So the implicit point in the [exhibit's] introduction is that no one is to blame for this. It is not a stepchild of our recent consumptive society. It just because of our innovativeness, basically, that we have gotten to this point."

But divorcing the Industrial Revolution from its social, political and economic context is irrevocably biased, implying that industrialism-by-means-of-capitalism was an innocent, natural evolution. Another story was told earlier this year at the annual United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, when native peoples from around the

world met to discuss the impacts of climate change on their communities. No one there would claim "no one is to blame" for the pending global climate catastrophe. Rather, industrialization is a direct consequence of centuries of conquest by imperial nations — the pursuit of wealth, power and progress by crushing native peoples and then seizing, privatizing and liquefying the landscape. Nature became a commodity and externalities became a problem left for future generations.

The curators effectively create a sense of urgency and distress through several display techniques. Key words are displayed in reds, such as "trap heat" and "warmer earth," in large paragraphs written on the walls. Dramatic music and a stern female voice narrating the short film, *Changing Climate, Changing World*, echo through the rooms. And headlines in red lights race across a news ticker on the wall, reminding the viewer that the exhibit exists in a real-time political moment (although Mathez noted that the items are only updated every six weeks or so).

The effects of climate change on the environment are examined: from severe storms and fires, the spread of disease and pests, to the rise in sea levels as a result of melting glaciers. The most dramatic display is the life-size dying coral reef, with shimmering lights from above creating the illusion of swimming in an underwater graveyard. A miniature replica of Manhattan is built over a computer screen showing how the rise in seawater — up to 16 feet — would turn most Manhattan streets blue. Two women were looking at the display. "My apartment will be okay," one said to the other.



PHOTO COURTESY: AMNH/D.FINNIN

Meandering through the photographs of floods and fires to the sound of water trickling between glass plates, it struck me that something was missing: the faces of people worldwide who are currently suffering the consequences of climate change. When I asked Mathez why these voices were missing, he said that the displays were about "potential consequences" and that "by and large we haven't felt the dire consequences" yet. This seemed an odd response considering that climate refugees already exist. People from the South Pacific island Carterets called on officials at the U.N. climate change meeting in Poland in early December to provide aid, as their ancestral lands will soon be swallowed by rising seawater. And the Inupiat tribe in Alaska filed a lawsuit last summer against 20 major oil, gas and electric companies, charging that they are responsible for causing the Arctic ice to melt from beneath their villages. The U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change predicts that by 2050 there will be more than 150 million climate refugees.

The exhibit concludes with energy "solutions" that boil down to a flat-out giveaway to industry — namely, coal and nuclear. The solutions mirror President-elect Barack Obama's climate change talking points, a plan that many experts say is riddled with problems. While the exhibit began by pounding coal as the climate culprit, it wraps up with a panel advocating "clean" coal-fired power plants as a cornerstone of our energy future, with no indication that this proposal is highly controversial within the scientific community. The display describes carbon capture as a controversial future technology where "experts are working to clean up coal" by trapping carbon from emissions in coal-fired power plants and then burying it underground.

"Whether we like it or not, coal is with us," Mathez said when questioned about the exhibit's promotion of so-called "clean coal" technology. "Coal is in our future because it is cheap ... and is abundant in exactly the countries that are using it."

This admission directly counters the recommendations of leading scientists including NASA's

climate whistleblower James Hansen and many others, who contend that humans must put a moratorium on new coal-fired power plants. Al Gore has called for the complete elimination of fossil fuels in ten years. And in the recent issue of *Mother Jones* magazine, top climate activist Bill McKibben puts it directly, "No more new coal plants ... and the people who tell you about clean coal are blowing smoke — literally." The exhibit's leading partner, Bank of America, has been the target of environmental campaigns to force banks to stop financing coal mining and a new generation of coal-fueled power (see sidebar).

In September, Gore surprised many by saying, "I believe we have reached the stage where it is time for civil disobedience to prevent the construction of new coal plants that do not have carbon capture and sequestration." The exhibit completely ignores the growing environmental and climate justice movement worldwide — thousands of people from Australia to Turkey to Europe to the United States who are organizing campaigns and locking themselves to fences, trains and bulldozers to stop coal exports, new power plants, airport expansions and new nuclear energy. While the exhibit clearly demonstrates that humans are teetering on the brink of a crisis, it offers no insight into the correlation between global warming and human justice.

If the American Museum of Natural History wants to truly lead the debate on climate change, its curators might want to talk to RisingTide, a decentralized global network of climate justice activists. When asked about the climate justice movement, Mathez confessed he knew little about it. These activists contend that "climate change can only be addressed by exposing the intersections between the oppressions of humans and the earth. The 'natural' disasters caused by climate change amplify the injustices inherent in a capitalist, racist and patriarchal society; we must respond to these disasters in ways that do not continue that oppression."

—JESSICA LEE

DON'T BANK ON COAL

Visitors should be highly skeptical of the proposed energy solutions after learning that Bank of America is the leading partner of the American Museum of Natural History's climate change exhibit. The environmental organization Rainforest Action Network (RAN) has been pressuring the bank, along with Citigroup, to stop pouring billions of dollars into devastating surface coal mining and new coal-fired power plants. On April 1, Bank of America CEO Kenneth Lewis was voted 2008's Fossil Fool of the Year in an online contest sponsored by RAN and other groups. Environmentalists targeted the bank Nov. 17 in a "day of action against coal and coal finance." Lead curator Dr. Edmond A. Mathez confessed that he was not aware of the criticism of the bank and that "it doesn't concern me in this particular context."

As a result of pressure by RAN and the Natural Resources Defense Council, the bank announced Dec. 3 that it will "phase out financing of companies whose predominant method of extracting coal is through mountaintop removal" mining in central Appalachia, the process where mountains are blown apart to expose coal layers below.



TURNING UP THE HEAT: Climate activists protest Bank of America's investments in coal June 26 at the bank's headquarters in Charlotte, North Carolina. PHOTO: RAN.ORG

Labor on the Move

Illegal People: How Globalization Creates Migration and Criminalizes Immigrants

By David Bacon
Beacon Press, 2008

Government repression in Mexico rarely makes headlines in the United States, and the few stories published almost never mention the northern migration patterns it sets in motion. This is the context David Bacon provides in *Illegal People*. Using anecdotes gathered from two decades of labor organizing and reporting, Bacon follows the way “economic reforms promoted by the U.S. government through trade agreements and international financial institutions displace workers, from miners to coffee pickers, who join a huge flood of labor moving north.” He examines the impact of these “reforms” on both sides of the U.S. border. The result is well-rounded analysis of the forces shaping and benefiting from migration. Many critics of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) focus on the way it undermines labor rights and environ-

mental regulations in order to clear the path to more profits for U.S. corporations. When these economic changes led to lower wages, workers for companies such as mining giant Grupo Mexico went on strike. Unlike pre-NAFTA campaigns, these strikes ended in destroyed unions and terminations. “Most of the miners who lost their jobs at Nacozari [a Grupo Mexico mine] also had to leave their homes,” explained Jorge Luis Morales, president of the Vigilance and Justice Commission of the union at the Cannanea mine. “I’m sure most of them are working in Tucson or Phoenix now, or even California. They are very skilled workers, but where else could they go?” Bacon argues NAFTA also serves as a cheap labor supply program for U.S. corporations on this side of the border, providing undocumented immigrants as an exploited class of workers. Paid less than minimum wage and forced to work long hours in often unsafe conditions, these workers are cowed into silence lest employers report them to immigration officials. Corporate lobbyists are working to enshrine these working conditions into law in the form of temporary visa and guest worker programs. First considered under the Bush administration as part of immigration reform efforts, these programs will likely be supported

by Democrats under President-elect Obama as a way to avoid being accused of supporting amnesty. In a chapter entitled “Fast Track to the Past,” Bacon outlines the true cost of these programs from the worker’s point of view. Starting with contract workers’ memories of the two-decade-long Bracero program that brought an army of transient workers to the United States from 1942 to 1964, he moves into the present with accounts from agricultural workers with temporary visas who found themselves blacklisted for speaking out about dangerous conditions such as lack of protection from exposure to pesticides. The most harrowing story is told by Edilberto Morales, the lone survivor of one of the worst accidents in the history of guest worker programs in which 14 of his co-workers died. Morales describes how he and his friends were speeding across a bridge deep in the woods of Maine in order to shorten the unpaid time it took to travel to their job planting trees. The men worked for Evergreen, a company contracted by paper manufacturing giant Kimberly Clarke. When one of its tires popped, the van skidded off the bridge and fell into the Allagash River. In the freezing water, Morales tried to save his friends, “but they were dead.” Despite years of being fined by the U.S. Department of Labor for



PUTTING FOOD ON THE TABLE: A Mexican immigrant picks bell peppers on a farm in central California. PHOTO: DBACON.IGC.ORG.

violations in how they paid, and not counting hours of unpaid overtime, Bacon reports that Evergreen continues to receive the certification required for employing H2-B guest workers. Perhaps not surprisingly, a poll of San Francisco’s street-corner day laborers by the city’s Day Labor Program found that workers rejected guest worker programs as the solution to immigration reform. “They feel that a temporary visa status would make them as vulnerable to exploitation as the undocumented status most of them now share,” program director Renee Saucedo tells Bacon. Looking outside the circle of

politicians and lobbyists, Bacon brings to the reform discussion voices of those who can help solve the riddle of immigration reform with workers’ rights in mind. They provide the evidence of the abusive and often deadly effects of the current immigration system. Indeed, Bacon argues, “it would be a terrible misuse of the fate of those workers if their deaths were used to justify a new system enshrining the abuses of the old.”

—RENEE FELTZ

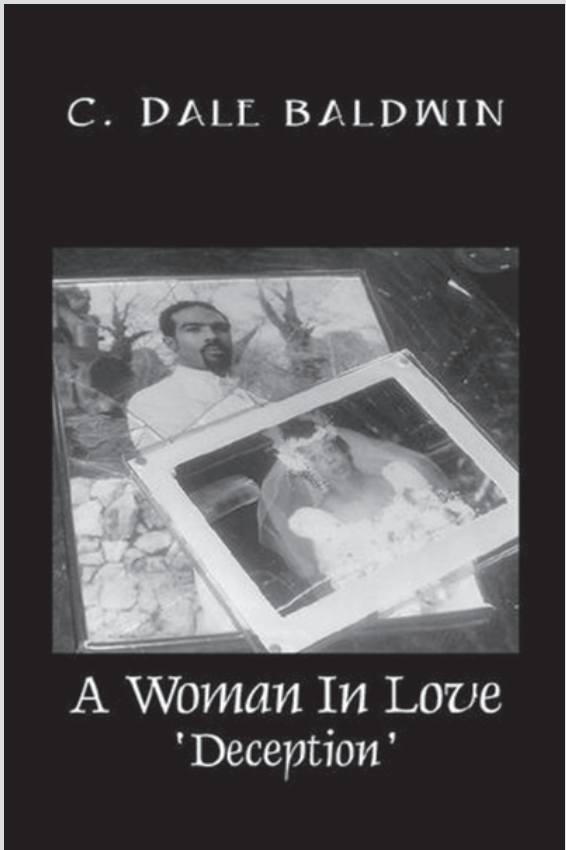
Renee Feltz is the co-producer of businessofdetention.com



A Woman In Love “Deception” By C. Dale Baldwin

IT’S HD READING AS EXTREME PASSION turns to depression for Clemintine when her husband’s darkest secret is revealed, heightening psychotic episodes that are masked by tender love making and soothing words as she tries to come to terms asking herself, “Should I stay or should I go?”

To read more go to
baldwinlovebooks.com





Returning to Lebanon

Waltz with Bashir
WRITTEN AND DIRECTED
BY ARI FOLMAN
SONY PICTURES CLASSICS/
BRIDGIT FOLMAN FILM GANG ET AL.,
2008

In September 1982, there was a massacre at the neighboring Sabra and Shatila refugee camps on the outskirts of Beirut. Militia forces of the right-wing Christian Phalangist party slaughtered some 3,000 Palestinian refugees, most of them unarmed.

The Phalangists were presumably seeking revenge for the unsolved assassination the previous day of their leader — and the President-elect of Lebanon — Bashir Gemayel. The two camps were surrounded by Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) troops that were then occupying Lebanon up to the outskirts of Beirut. Israeli and Palestinian accounts differ widely about the extent to which IDF troops — and Israeli government officials — were complicate in, or responsible for, the slaughter. But it is undisputed that Israeli forces allowed the Phalange to enter the camps and never intervened, and Israel’s then-Defense Minister Ariel Sharon was eventually removed from his post because of his part in the massacre (although he was later elected prime minister).

Waltz with Bashir, the new “animated documentary” by Israeli filmmaker Ari Folman, retells the story of the massacre through the memories of a handful of Israeli soldiers who served with the IDF forces in Beirut. It begins with the recurring nightmare of one veteran, who slowly comes to realize he has no memory of the events of his military service. He tells his filmmaker friend Ari about the nightmares, and finds that Ari, too, has missing memories. Together they embark on an investigation, interviewing former military comrades and slowly piecing together the story of the massacre and their part in it.

It is half documentary and half fiction, relating real and imagined events — almost entirely in the real voices of the participants — but using animated images instead of filmed actuality. Thus, when Ari travels to the Netherlands to speak with one fellow veteran, we see him driving through the flat, snow-covered winter landscape that is the real Netherlands in winter. But we also see the interviewees’ nightmares, as when a veteran of the Beirut occupation dreams of immense dogs chasing him with bared, slavering fangs down endless war-ravaged streets. And when another veteran remembers landing on the coast of Lebanon in the arms of an immense, naked sea-goddess, we see him floating in her arms.

None of the interviewees were inside the camps during the slaughter, and we see only their periphery, not the massacre itself. The film attempts to find some truth by piecing together differing accounts — one veteran’s story, for instance, portrays IDF forces as having no idea what was happening, while another shows them all too aware of it. But as the tales wear on, it seems that Folman is not finding an answer to — or declining to answer — the question of responsibility.

Yet suddenly, we’re watching live action, not animation. *Waltz with Bashir* ends with a long, wrenching sequence of the return of Palestinian women to the camp and their dreadful cries of grief as they find their dead children and husbands.

Waltz with Bashir evades the crucial question of IDF and Israeli responsibility for the massacre. Yet in its stark and often disturbing images, and especially in the heart-wrenching ending, it makes no attempt to evade the horror of the event. It is neither an anti-Zionist or anti-Israel film, but it at least is making an attempt to face some of the horrific consequences of the Israeli policies of the last 30 years.

—JUDITH MAHONEY PASTERNAK

Waltz with Bashir opens Dec. 26 at the Lincoln Plaza and Landmark Sunshine theaters.

Frontline Testimonies

Winter Soldier Iraq and Afghanistan: Eyewitness Accounts of the Occupations
BY IRAQ VETERANS AGAINST THE WAR AND AARON GLANTZ
HAYMARKET BOOKS, 2008

Not My Enemy
BY WARRIOR WRITERS,
ANOTHER BOOKLYN CHAPBOOK,
ISSUE 7, 2008
BOOKLYN ARTISTS ALLIANCE,
BOOKLYN.ORG

The cliché tells us that war is hell and dozens of books and films attest to the magnitude of the horror and carnage that define armed conflict. Now, two new texts drive the point home by focusing on U.S. aggression in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Winter Soldier, a compilation of testimonies from 53 veterans, Iraqi civilians and parents of dead service members, is gut-knotting. While there are no African-American voices in the collection — an unexplained omission that is especially odd since more than 17 percent of U.S. soldiers are Black — the statements are a grim reminder of the lawless and shockingly racist and sexist nature of combat.

Patterned after the 1971 Winter Soldier hearings — eyewitness accounts that heralded a shift in public opinion against U.S. involvement in Vietnam — a speak-out in March 2008 was organized by Iraq Veterans Against the War to coincide with the fifth anniversary of the occupation. Held less than ten miles from the White House, the event was meant to educate both lawmakers and the public about the conflict. Predictably, neither George Bush nor Dick Cheney attended and the proceedings received scant attention from mainstream media.

It’s a pity — maybe even a crime — that the Masters of War have remained insulated from the poignant accounts of men and women on the front lines.

They need to hear from soldiers like Hart Vigés, a 32-year-old vet-

eran of the Army’s 82nd Airborne Division, who began his testimony with a confession. “I don’t know how many civilians — innocents — I’ve killed or helped kill.” He then describes an encounter with an Iraqi man carrying a rocket-propelled grenade. “I had my sight on his chest ... but when I looked at his face, he wasn’t a bogeyman. He wasn’t the enemy. He was scared and confused, probably the same expression I had on my face. ... He was probably force-fed the same BS I was fed. I’d seen his face and it took me back and I didn’t pull the trigger.”

He describes an attempt to capture several alleged terrorists. “We never went on a raid where we got the right house, let alone the right person, not once,” Vigés admits. In one incident, he reports that a woman whose home he invaded got on her knees, pleading that she and her sons had done nothing to antagonize the United States. “The mother all the while is crying in my face, trying to kiss my feet. I can’t speak Arabic, but I can speak human. She was saying, ‘Please, why are you taking my sons? They have done nothing wrong.’ I was powerless to help her.”

For 23-year-old Christopher Arendt, a U.S. Army National Guardsman from Charlotte, Mich., a stint in Guantánamo explained how easy it is for people to become the equivalent of Nazi storm troopers. “The primary difficulty in keeping my humanity intact was boredom,” he begins. While he says that he was able to sidestep the most egregious violations of prisoners’ human rights, his descriptions of detainee torture are harrowing.

Still, it is testimony from Iraqi civilians that packs the hardest punch. “We were in class,” says 11-year-old Shayma. “They said there were weapons or terrorists in the school.” Not surprisingly, a search turned up nothing. “After that my mother and father decided I should quit school,” Shayma says. “They had to because of the deteriorated security situation. ... Most of my friends and classmates made the same decision and stopped going to school. Half the teachers also stayed home, concerned about their lives.”

Parents of dead GIs further expose the devastating personal impact of the two wars. “An average of 120 veterans commit suicide each week,” say Joyce and Kevin Lucey, parents of former U.S. Marine convoy driver Jeffrey Lucey. When Jeff returned from combat, they explain, he was severely depressed and suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and panic attacks. He began drinking heavily — some would call it self-medicating. The Veterans Affairs hospital refused to treat him unless he was sober.

“Jeff said he wanted to tell the psychiatrist conducting his dis-

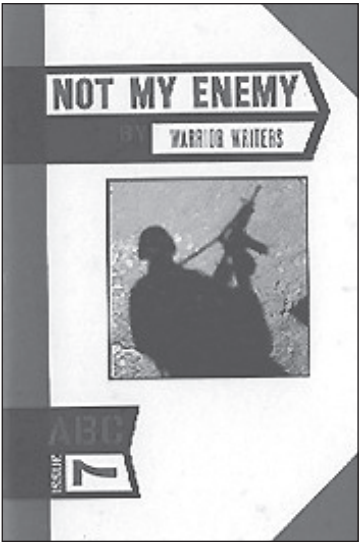
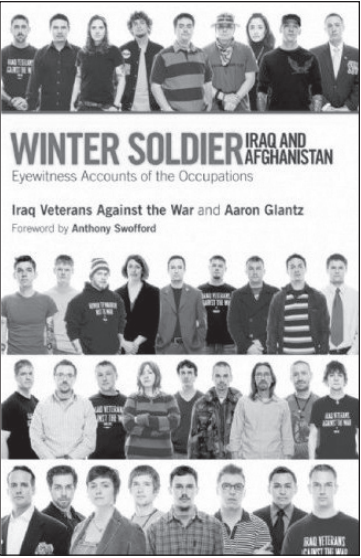
charge interview about the bumps in the Iraq road that were the children his Marine convoy was told not to stop for and just not look back,” his mother Joyce testified. “He decided not to reveal this deeply sensitive information when the psychiatrist interrupted their session three times to answer phone calls.” Desperate to stop the memories that haunted him, Jeff hanged himself in his parents’ home June 22, 2004, at age 23.

The difficulties in adjusting to life after war are further exposed in *Not My Enemy*, a zine of poetry, art and prose crafted by 22 returning soldiers and IVAW members. Rich and evocative, the entries ask poignant questions. There’s “PTSD,” a short poem by Matt Howard: “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder / How is this a disorder?/ How about a going to war and coming home with a clear conscience disorder?/ I think that would be far more appropriate.”

Camilo Mejia, the first U.S. soldier incarcerated for publicly refusing to return to Iraq, closes *Winter Soldier* with clear demands: Immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all occupying forces; full benefits to all military personnel; and reparations to the people of Iraq so that they can rebuild their country.

President-elect Barack Obama would be wise to heed these injunctions.

—ELEANOR J. BADER



Fearless Cinema

NEW YORK CITY HORROR FILM FEST
NOVEMBER 12-16, 2008

Halloween may have come and gone, but as movie ticket sales and rising rentals point out, horror is timeless. And this year’s New York City Horror Film Festival, now in its eighth year, showcased a cornucopia of the interesting, unexpected and the traditional.

Modern monsters (psycho-killers, zombies, urban legends, etc.), a staple of the genre since the 1960s, were well represented in notable films like the action short *First Kill*, the eerie feature *From a Place of Darkness*, psycho-short *Drip*, and the apocalyptic short *Antibody*. B-movies — a volatile blend of horror, gusto and laughs — excited audiences with Frank Henelotter’s *Bad Biology* winning Best Feature and Zoe Polley’s teen gorefest *Devil’s Grove*. The horrific whodunit *Surveillance* by Jennifer Chambers Lynch and the monochromatic, antiwar, pantomime *Hold Your Fire* by Jesse Gordon spoke to fans of intense horror.

Multi-genre films, particularly the sci-fi/horror hybrid, pushed expectations and won audiences over with each showing. The 1980s sci-fi satire/homage short *Martians Go Home* follows a sci-fi nerd’s battle with hostile space zombies. Harry Owen can’t escape his short-film existence in the humorous meta-fiction *The Glitch*. *Eel Girl* is a sleek and humorous horror-short-cum-music-video. Audience Choice-winning feature *Time Crimes* (*Cronocrimenenes*) by Spanish director Nacho Vigalondo is a mind-bending mystery that brings out the best of both genres.

Surprisingly, absurd and humorous horror films dominated the fest with provocation and by connecting with audiences. Along with the above mentioned, notable films included the zombie-ex-girlfriend love-triangle short *Burying the Ex* and Jason Eisner’s Audience Choice-winning short *Treevenge*, which is sure to please many environmentalists. Luke Ricci explores a taboo fantasy with zeal in the feature *How to Be a Serial Killer*. In the pantomimed short, *The Sleuth Incident*, Jason Kupfer blends cuteness with graphic violence. A lonely janitor battles a perpetually filthy toilet in Nathan Bezner’s Best Short-winning film *Altar*. The monochromatic animated short *Back to Life* presents a different perspective on Frankenstein and his creation. In the claymation short *c/o Flap Jackson*, we follow a man’s growing suspicion over a mail-delivered wooden crate.

Aside from the sci-fi hybrids,

most of the horror depicted in these films focused on the mundane (teddy bears in *The Sleuth Incident*, toilets in *Altar*, Christmas trees in *Treevenge*) presenting a world at once familiar and disturbing.

As we count the final days of the Bush administration, we cringe at the numerous disasters that plagued this country throughout the last eight years. From 9/11, to Hurricane Katrina, to the Iraq War and now the current economic crisis, it seems like catastrophe is synonymous with the Bush era. And horror films like *Cloverfield* and Zach Snyder’s *Dawn of the Dead*

reflected the social anxieties and palpable nightmares.

Very similar to the way in which the currently popular superhero movies reflect our idealized selves, horror films point out the cracks in the social façade. Despite all the horrors in the world, be they human-made, supernatural, otherworldly or just plain bizarre, the standout films presented an optimistic view: that with dedication, action and wit, we can overcome great evil.

—FRANK REYNOSO



Back to Life



Time Crimes



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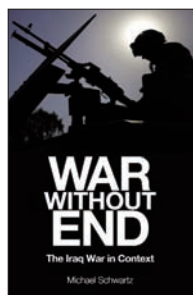
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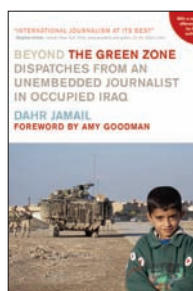
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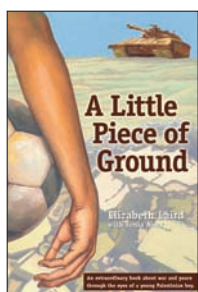
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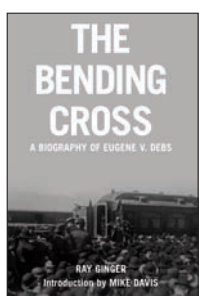
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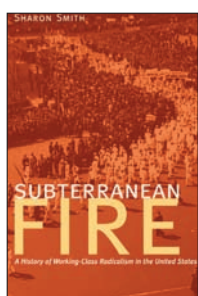
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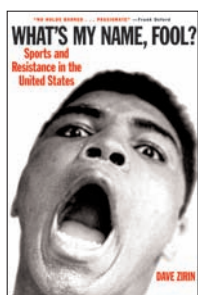
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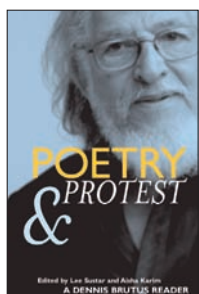
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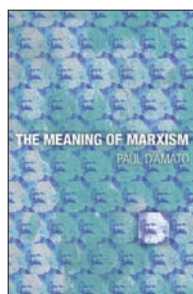
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